

# DEATHREALM

THE LAND WHERE HORROR DWELLS

ISSUE #14, SPRING 1991

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# DEATHREALM

## THE LAND WHERE HORROR DWELLS

ISSUE #14 SPRING, 1991

WINNER OF THE 1990 SPWAO  
BEST MAGAZINE AWARD

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**PLEASE NOTE: DEATHREALM IS CURRENTLY CLOSED TO UNSOLICITED SUBMISSIONS.** Any and all work, including poetry and art, received until May 1, 1991 will be returned.

This issue dedicated to:  
**Shirley McMaistry**  
that little old  
Vixen from Night Dreams.

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Front Cover



# R.I.P. Words From The Editor



n item that arrived too late to give to Andrea for review but that bears mentioning is Bucky Montgomery's *Year in Darkness 1991 Calendar*. It features artwork by John Borkowski, Lance Brown, Richard Dahstrom, Charles Dougherty, Alfred Klosterman, Allen Koszowski, Ron Leming, Marge Simon, Timothy Standish, David Transue, Jay Willison, and several others whose work is well known in the small and pro presses. Each artist illustrates a particular month; additionally, several eminent authors contribute short prose pieces to complement the illos. You'll notice quite a few names of DEATHREALM's (ir)regular contributors, and illos by Charles Dougherty and Timothy Standish that originally appeared in these pages are reproduced in the calendar.

Since I work in the advertising business (by day, at least), my eye is automatically drawn to the small details of a graphic piece like this one. Bucky Montgomery knows his work. The calendar is impeccably composed, jammed full of material, and just plain neat. My only reservation about the package is that it's so damn big (17" x 34"), that you have to have a lot of wall space to hang it, and even then, it's so tall you have to look waayy up to see the art. Reading the short fiction is best done before hanging, unless you have tele-scopic vision.

The calendar can be ordered from Bucky Montgomery, 692 Calero Avenue, San Jose, CA 95123, for \$7.94 each. For \$11.94, you can get one signed by each of the artists.

A note from the OOPS! Department: in last issue's *Graveside Chat*, James Robert Smith was erroneously credited with having appeared in ELDritch TALES. Strike that; it isn't so. Substitute TALES OF LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR in its place.

Apologies for an editorial blunder.

Currently in effect: DEATHREALM is closed to unsolicited submissions until May 1, 1991. We're vastly overstocked, so anything coming in until that date will be returned unread.

I want to extend my appreciation to all those who sent us Christmas cards. I didn't send out as many as I should have — can't offer any excuses here. Please know that we are grateful for everyone's support, and that it hasn't gone unnoticed. Hope all of you had wonderful holidays.

Special thanks go to John Brower and Ann Kennedy for their unsolicited support. It's great to know that there are indeed saints out there helping to keep watch over certain editors.

I'm taking up now several weeks after the above was written. It's now day six of the Persian Gulf War. By the time this issue gets back from press, I hope the fighting will be over. A few months back, shortly after troops were deployed in the Middle East, I sent a care package of DEATH-REALM's to Saudi Arabia, not knowing whether or not they might get through the Saudi censors. Indeed they did, for I received a wonderful letter from Sgt. Gary McFerrin, who circulated the copies I sent among his company. They were apparently read and enjoyed, and I sincerely hope that the fictional horrors in these pages might have for a short time taken the minds of a few of our men and women away from the real-life horrors currently unfolding over there.

I'm not going to expound on the politics of the war with Iraq, except to say that I have nothing but support for our troops and our government. I've had little but contempt for politicians for the last several years, and to be sure, there are urgent issues here at home that absolutely must be addressed. But I hope that if this conflict ends on the positive note that I think it will, our country will be in a renewed position of strength to deal with matters both foreign and domestic. The day this war is over, will be quite joyous for me. Today, I can honestly say I'm proud to be an American.

Next time: Gary Braunbeck, Wilum H. Pugmire, Jeff VanderMeer, Elizabeth Massie, Gerard Houamer, Ronald Kelly, Robert Baldwin, and more.

*Mark Rainey*

Mark Rainey



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# Tiny Islands

By Jeffrey Osler

I.



IN MY SIXTEENTH birthday—having renounced God and wanting no more from life than the chance to withdraw into my own private hell and just maybe carve a piece of the outside world into the image of that hell—I spent fifty cents on a fossil trilobite at the Gift Shop of the Field Museum in Chicago, and decided to submit my fate to its ancient, pristine influence.

School had been out for a week. On that last day of school, my girlfriend of three months, Debbie Mayer, had dumped me for my friend, Curt Decker. In the course of milking all the melodrama I could out of this little tragedy I'd managed to bore and depress everyone within earshot—including myself—so my first request to the fossil-charm was to clear the little bitch from my thoughts once and for all. I should probably have been suspicious the moment I realized just how quickly and thoroughly it granted that request.

It was the summer of 1970, and it was our intention to spend the whole summer playing softball, buying records, hanging around at Cunningham Beach or else just slumming our days along the DuPage River. The river ran across three forest preserves, along the edges of back yards, through downtown, and behind Cunningham Beach, where its course was broken up by a number of tiny islands, some of which were overgrown with weeds and trees that in the height of the summer created an imposing thicket in which we managed to find some of the privacy and isolation we seemed to hunger for so much. We would spend our afternoons swimming and carousing at the beach—which was an old quarry converted into the world's biggest and greenest swimming pool—and then, when the world seemed particularly dull or oppressive, we would head on out to the river and wade to the tiny islands and feel, for fleeting

moments at a time, that we had truly escaped.

In reality, we were a fairly childish bunch of sixteen year olds. We weren't particularly tough or violent, and it wouldn't be another year before drugs would begin to wash over us like a sweet, corrosive perfume. None of us had a driver's license, few of us had anything remotely resembling jobs and I think, for some of us, all we really wanted was to hide out just a little longer before... well, *whatever*. Obviously, something had to happen to us sooner or later, and we had the unshakable conviction that this something would be bad. Lifetimes worth of responsibilities, compromises and tragedies awaited us, and these prospects filled us with what threatened to become an all-encompassing dread. I could see it in Kevin MacDonald's eyes, hear it in the halting monotonies of Ralph Coleman's voice and in the sad, misanthropic ravings of Curt Decker.

As for me, well, I couldn't understand how I'd held out as long as I had. Three and a half years before, during the Big Snow of '67, while living in another town, I'd gone out snowballing and skitching with some friends and had been attacked by... well, how can I tell you this in a way that will sound believable? Let's just say that three of my best friends were murdered that night and I subsequently went home and tried to kill myself. My father had just died a few weeks before, and I believe his death had driven me crazy. Here it was, three and a half years later, and I was still convinced I was crazy.

I would sit out on the tiny islands, sometimes with my friends, sometimes alone, and I would try to will myself sane or will the world into something in which I would *appear* sane. I would gaze into the intricate impression the trilobite had left upon the coin-sized rock, who-knows how many millions of years ago and try to create some kind of resonant connection between the life it had led in that distant Cambrian sea to the life it was now accompanying me through, as though that connection made me a focused unit upon a predictable, benevolent time-line.

Meanwhile, I was taking U.S. History in summer school. Every day at noon I would walk Robin Carlisle home. It was a ten

minute walk during which we were learning—almost in spite of ourselves—how to talk to each other in ways that neither of us could talk to anyone else in the world. And although Robin was Ralph Coleman's girlfriend, and Ralph was my best friend, I began to realize that I was falling in love with her and that somehow, something had to be done about it.

One Saturday, two weeks after the beginning of summer school, we were at Cunningham Beach, sitting around on our towels on the lawn near the water. I kept a pained but watchful eye on Robin and Ralph, trying to learn something from the way they looked and talked to each other. While Curt and Debbie gave each other those long, sweet looks they always wore when they were about to start making out in public, and Ralph argued with Marty Hiatt—for about the thousandth time in my recollection—about who were the best and, conversely, the most overrated guitarists "in the world," Robin just sat there. Ralph didn't talk to her, didn't acknowledge her presence, didn't even seem to feel the light stroke of her fingertips up and down the center of his back. Robin kept her soft blue eyes on him, on the water, or upon all the people passing back and forth in front of us, and I kept my eyes on her. It was easy. No one bothered to look at me at all, not even Robin, although there were moments when I was sure she knew I was looking at her and was posing her prettiest for my benefit. After about a half hour of this shit, I had to get the hell out of there. They all said goodbye as though they couldn't understand why I had to leave at three in the afternoon and told me how much they hated to see me go and all of that. All except Robin. She wouldn't even look at me.

I went out to one of the tiny islands and just sat there, watching the suds pockets bob and thicken along the water's edge, unable to think about anything but Robin.

Above me cumulus clouds crawled across a sky of Robin's-eye blue. I lay back on the dirt and searched the edges and shaded interiors and textures of those clouds, not trying to make them appear like something familiar, just trying to lose

myself in the curves and convolutions of forms unlike any I'd ever really noticed before. My hand, moving about to provide a better cushion for my head, rubbed against something hard and sharp. I sat up hissing in pain, and saw blood flowing from an abrasion on my knuckle. I looked down and saw a slightly smeared drop of my blood, glimmering with reflected sunlight, resting on the crest of a gray, scimitar-shaped rock half protruding out of the ground. As I alternately sucked my knuckle and then rubbed it on my cut-offs, I looked down at the smeared droplet and the strangely beautiful shape on which it rested. I rubbed the blood away, spreading a red sash down that curving stone blade, and then picked up a stick and began poking away at the dirt around the rock. I suppose I started out with the intention of freeing it, examining it briefly and then tossing it in the water.

Evidently, some time passed.

"What are you doing?"

"I turned around with a gasp.

"Oh, God, Danny, I didn't mean to scare you!"

"You didn't scare me. I was just...what are you doing here?"

"I was up there," pointing up the weed-choked slope that led up to the rear fence of Cunningham Beach, "walking home, and I thought I saw you. It was hard to tell...the leaves and weeds are really thick out here."

"I know. That's what I love about this island. This one in particular."

She knelt at my side. Her blonde, cork-screw curls brushed against my unshirts shoulder for just an instant. She laid her hands over the top of the rock I had been unearthing and petted it gently, far more gently than she had Ralph's back. I looked at that perfect hand, and then, in its wake, at the form across which it had passed.

Had I done this? Could this possibly be the same rock I'd cut my hand on, the same small, single-curved piece I'd been poking around? With its curves, its jointed segments, it didn't resemble a rock at all.

Robin ran off and then returned immediately with water cupped in her hands. Her arm brushed warm against my own as she

sat beside me and released the water onto the stone. The surface beneath the thin layer of dirt was a light, fleshy pink, scattered with red and violet specks ranging in size from sugar granules to pennies. It was made up of two graceful, slightly asymmetrical arcs with a multi-faceted nodule rising at its center. Was it bone? A buried statue? It looked like raw, diseased flesh but it felt cool and polished, like porcelain.

"We can't tell anybody about this."

"Why not, Danny? It's so beautiful!"

"Well, then, let's just not tell anybody about it yet. Okay? Let's...dig out the whole thing first, okay?"

"You and me?" She stared right into my eyes, looking frightened half to death, and then nodded her head slowly.

"Okay."

\*\*\*\*\*

**...The head...was thick and rounded, except for two long, sharp prongs that extended down from the sides and mingled into the latticework of ribs...we could feel it starting back at us...**

BUT OF COURSE it didn't work out that way. Neither of us went back to the island for almost another week. When I finally went out there myself, and sat digging with my fingers and occasionally a short sharp-edged stick, no more than a half-hour passed before I heard splashes behind me and turned to see Robin and Ralph, hand in hand.

"Hey, Pickett, what's going on?"

I didn't answer. I just stepped away from my handiwork and watched Robin's eyes and mouth widen in wonderment, and watched Ralph kneel and squint with a visage of measured disbelief.

"Holy shit, Danny. What the fuck is this?"

I looked back and forth from my friends to the thing rising up out of the ground at my feet and made an introduction.

"It's the Trilobite Man."

\*\*\*\*\*

AND SO MY PLAN for creating a perfect rendezvous for Robin and me faltered before it ever started. I spent the rest of that afternoon clawing away with my fingers and poking away with a stubby twig, slowly revealing more and more of the figure—it was no longer merely a form—while Robin

watched and sometimes helped and while Ralph sometimes watched and sometimes tried to distract Robin with some half-hearted attempt at conversation.

I ignored them both, preferring instead to lovingly uncover the Trilobite Man's smooth, cold, meat-colored ribs.

For the next couple of weeks, I spent every afternoon out there. Almost every day somebody joined me, though no one besides Robin ever lent a hand in the digging. And of course, even though he never paid any attention to her unless it was just the three of us, Ralph never let her set foot on the island without him.

I don't know...at what point did I start to notice the change? Did I accept it all at once or just gradually surrender myself to it, and how long afterwards did it take everyone

else to notice it? My life until now had consisted of so many impacted pockets of strange, death-like dislocations, deluded fantasies of revenge and of my father returning to me after all these years.

And of course there was my memory of the man—the thing—that had killed my friends three and a half years before, and the guilty horror with which I covered up all knowledge of what had happened to them and how it seemed to tie in with the savage beating which the world saw as a brutal but botched suicide attempt. Looking at it from that perspective it would have been so easy to dismiss it as just another fantasy, just another example of me withdrawing from the world that had left me so unanchored and Godless. But it was more than that.

Something happened to me and my friends—to the world—once we crossed the narrow stretch of river onto the banks of the tiny island. Sounds that I could not hear beyond that shoreline would swell up from nowhere the moment I stepped on the island; the sounds of millions of hunting, hovering or digging insects, each of whose cries seemed unique from all the rest, but who, as a group, formed a thick, hypnotically resonant harmony in which tones seemed



to waver and bend in unison. If it was raining, the rain always seemed to be of a different character and consistency on the island—warmer, more aromatic, and, in the sound of its impact upon the leaves and dirt, somehow possessed of a songlike quality of its own. I would stand out on the open edge of the island letting the rain roar down on me as though it were a single living entity, reaching down for the sole purpose of calming and reassuring me. The world beyond the edges of the island always seemed a little less colorful, as though all that color was being sucked into the island itself, enriching the blues and greens of the leaves and grasses, the gemlike glint of its stones, the protective covering of the island's single great weeping willow tree—known by us as The Great Weeper—and the blood-suffused hues of the Trilobite Man.

But of course none of this was visible from even as close as fifteen feet—the distance between the river's shoreline and that of the island. It was just another tiny island. And when we ourselves were off the island, we never talked about it in any way that would indicate that it held any special power over us.

Even Robin and I, alone together every weekday at noon as I walked her home from school, never mentioned the island or the Trilobite Man. Instead, I would let her look at my poetry, and we'd both pretend that none of its heartfelt but thoroughly shameless clichés were directed at anyone in particular, or I would show her the panels of the underground comic I was scribbling away at during those three hour U.S. History lectures. I would speak softly, trying to mold myself with every word and gesture into everything I knew Ralph wasn't. She got to the point where she would complain about him and I would comfort her to the razor's edge of making an outright overture to her.

So, by mid-July, I was hopelessly in love with Robin and couldn't stop thinking of her except for those moments when I was on the island, when she became—if only because of Ralph's presence—just another castaway, just another being lost in the bewitching folds and breezes that held this island-world together.

\*\*\*\*\*

"THERE" I STOOD and brushed my dirty hands on my jeans.

I had been digging for several days—in my slow, deliberate fashion—at a massive form that appeared to be the Trilobite Man's head.

They all gathered around me now, looking down at the crowning bulk. The Trilobite Man had up until this point not exhibited any hint of symmetry. But now, as we looked down at it, there seemed to be an overwhelming sense of *form*. It was still far from symmetrical and its trilobite-like segments were really more like a tangle of ribs, all of varying lengths and thicknesses. Some of them were as thick as human limb-bones and rode over the top at severe angles to all the rest, and one could easily see them as appendages—as true arms and legs. But it was the crown, the *head* that gave it its strongest semblance of biological organization. It was thick and rounded, except for two long, sharp prongs that extended down from the sides and thinned down and mingled into the latticework of ribs. Upon its bulbous peak were five smooth fissures that extended at least three inches into it.

We looked down at it, especially into those holes, and for the first time could feel it staring back at us.

## II

IT WAS A luscious, hanging fly ball, and I could see by its trajectory that it was going to come down about twenty feet behind Marty Hiatt, practically into the street between the park and the train depot.

"Back up, Marty, this one's yours!" I shouted.

Marty sprang to life like someone awakening from a nightmare, skinny arms flailing, his long hair sweeping over his face, as he began running back, still not quite sure where he and the ball should rendezvous. Well, he tried. He leaped into the air, the ball came crashing down on the hood of Amazing Grace's pickup truck, and Marty landed on top of it, bouncing against metal and then rolling dazed down into the grass, while the ball came tumbling after him.

"HEY!"

It was Amazing Grace (known as Jumbo

to his friends), all three hundred pounds of him, coming out from the Parkside Tavern. Amazing was one of the town's most notorious rednecks, a hard-drinking, shit-kicking good-old-boy.

"You little faggot! What the fuck are you don't 'a my truck?"

Amazing Grace was moving fast, and when a guy that big and red and ugly in the face is moving fast, it can't help but inspire fear in you. Marty got up, grabbed the ball, and backed away in total panic.

Kevin ran up behind me and poked a finger into my shoulder blade. "Oh, shit, oh shit," he whispered.

Amazing stopped and looked at the hood of his blue pick-up and then at Marty. "Come here, boy!"

Marty turned tail and ran towards us, but Amazing Grace, who, after all, was far more Amazing than he was Jumbo, managed to charge after Marty and catch him before he reached us.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a police car pulling up the adjacent street, making his circuit. If only he could just turn the corner now and see....

Amazing Grace swung Marty around, lowering over him, roaring a wave of drunken obscenities down at him and raising that big arm to backhand him.

We were on him as a group, surrounding him and shouting out our loudest, deepest threats while Curt jumped into the center of it all, brandishing the baseball. Amazing backed off and turned to see the cop car pulling up along side us. He put up his hand and motioned the cop over to us. The car stopped and a cop got out. As the car door shut I read the motto decalated there: "We Care. We Enforce."

"Hey, Jumbo, what's the problem?"

"Jim, these assholes were jumpin' all over my pickup and when I told them to get off they tried to take me on at once. And this carrot-headed one here tried to swat me with that bat."

The cop just turned his head towards us, one of those quick, bantyard chicken-like moves that adults always used when they were handed an unexpected revelation of the worst kind about you.

"What's your problem, boys? Smoking

dope and getting a little crazy? Do you want me to run you all downtown?"

Amazing Grace just laughed and Jim the cop smiled at him before turning an even more severe face back to us.

"We were just playing ball, officer," Mike Kinney piped in.

"I went after this ball and I just...fell on his hood," Marty just shrugged, turning red and realizing the only way to get the rest of us out of this was to make himself look like a total idiot.

"Yeah, and this guy comes spilling out of the bar and screaming at us!" Kevin offered. Curt threw the bat on the ground. "Of course if you guys are buddies, by all means! Throw our asses in jail!"

The cop stepped up to Curt and jabbed an outstretched finger before the boy's freckly face. "Hey, son! I'll do just that if I hear any more of that kind of talk!"

"Teach 'em a lesson, jimmy," Amazing Grace said, sounding as though he had a mouthful of half-chewed banana.

"Jumbo, why don't you just go home and let me take care of this, okay?"

Amazing Grace shrugged and said okay. He reached down, picked up the bat—my bat, and got into the truck and drove away. When he was gone the cop turned back to us.

"If I hadn't stopped when I did you know what would have happened to you? Little guys like you taking on Jumbo Grace? He'd have snatched that bat out of your hands, busted it over his knee and then done the same to the rest of you. And hey! There wouldn't have been a damn thing you could have done about it. I gotta tell you boys, I don't think either of your stories sounded too good, but form what I could see when I drove up, you guys were gangin' up on an adult...and you had a baseball bat. Any other town, any other circumstances, and they'd call that a bunch of punks trying to roll a drunk. I'm gonna let you go this time, just because I don't think I've ever seen any of you before, but I want your names, and I want you to know I'm going to remember your faces."

And that was it. I asked why he the guy drive off with my baseball bat, and the cop suggested I go see Jumbo myself and ask for it. It wasn't until he got back into the car

that I noticed there had been a second cop, sitting in the passenger seat and grinning at the whole thing. They both waved as they drove away.

"What a cocksucker!" cried Jack Kelleher. "Which cocksucker are you referring to," Kevin asked, "those redneck assholes or the Human Torch here?"

"Hey," Curt hissed, "at least I didn't just stand here waiting for them to slap my hand!"

I turned on Curt and pointed my finger in his face, not much differently than the cop had. "No, man! You just decided to throw a tantrum about it! He wouldn't have taken my bat if you hadn't fucking thrown it on the ground!"

Ralph looked down at Marty. "You okay, Marty?"

Marty just stood there, looking like a guy who absolutely refused to cry no matter what. He turned away and waved us off.

"I'm going home. I'll see you tomorrow." We just stood there quietly for a while, watching Marty retreat and finally disappear around a corner.

"Amazing Grace," Ralph said in disbelief. "I'd like to kill the motherfucker," Kevin hissed.

Something ugly awoke deep in my gut and rose up into my skull, making my face burn and my teeth grind. I felt as though I'd awoken from a three and a half year dream.

\*\*\*\*\*

IT WAS A perfectly normal summer weekday. I walked Robin home, went home myself, ate, changed and headed off for an afternoon at Cunningham Beach. When I stepped out of the locker room I saw the usual gang of idiots all sitting around a picnic table near the concession stand.

The moment I reached them I realized something was wrong. Their faces just hung there, eyes drooping, mouths defiantly shut. Marty's girlfriend Sue was crying, and Debbie and Robin huddled on either side of her, stroking her hands and gently shushing her.

"What happened?" It was Ralph who looked up at me first. "Marty's in the hospital. He got beat up." "MARTY?"

Kevin stood up. "Amazing Grace!"

And so I heard the story: Marty had been walking home alone from Sue's house around ten o'clock the night before, when Amazing Grace pulled up in his pick-up truck, got out an, four blocks from Marty's house, beat the shit out of him. Broke his nose, pulled his neck out of joint, and busted two ribs.

And then he drove Marty home, dragged him out of the back of the pick-up and up to the front door, and proceeded to tell Mr. and Mrs. Hiatt that their son had been harassing him ever since an altercation at Burlington Park a couple of weeks before, had been shouting insults to him and throwing rocks at his truck. Tonight he'd hit the windshield with a rock and almost sent Amazing Grace's truck into a tree. When Amazing got out of the truck, all shaken up, Marty continued howling and throwing things at him, and so Amazing gave chase. Caught him. And "defended" himself.

"So Marty gets taken to the hospital, the Hiatts go with Amazing Grace down to the cop station, but they *don't* press charges. Seems the police believed his story. And the Hiatts, the fucking Hiatts, they end up believing it, too." Kevin, who'd been Marty's best friend since kindergarten, shook his head. "You should hear them. They told me they thought Marty would learn a valuable lesson from all this."

"Can you believe this?" Curt railed. "How can they live with him and be stupid enough to believe a story like that?"

And so we just poured out all our bitterness against our parents. All of us had problems, real or imagined, with our parents, and it was the only subject about which we always seemed to be able to speak with any kind of passionate indignation. Every unjust we saw in another's parents became our own. The Hiatts had committed the most perverse one of all: not knowing their son, not believing in him, not sticking up for him. It didn't matter whether they believed that Marty, peaceful, polite and studious, could have harassed a three-hundred pound shit-kicker so mercilessly, or whether they were just as afraid of Amazing Grace as we were. A real father

or mother would have stood up for Marty. Wouldn't they?"

We decided to visit him at the hospital. It was a long, desperate trudge, and every vehicle that passed us, every overweight person we saw, inspired a seething rage in us.

Of course it was the violation that made us smell blood, that made us so hungry for revenge. Had it been a kid at school it would have been different. But Amazing Grace was at least thirty years old. *An adult*. We seethed because, in reality, this all just confirmed our most melodramatic visions of ourselves and the adult world we despised so much. It wasn't a game. Adults really were tainted and cruel and all in it together.

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THAT NIGHT I ate at Curt's house. Afterwards we picked up Mike Kinney and Jack Kelleher at Cunningham Beach and all four of us went down to the river.

And onto the island. There were mosquitos all around the river but none on the island. The air smelled

of sewage down by the river, but the odors on the island were sweet and alive and seemed to be somehow connected to the melodies that whispered up from the depths of the lush, snaking vegetation that grew along its soft, crystal-dotted shore. Near the north edge of the island, just outside the reach of the Great Weeper, lay the Trilobite Man.

For awhile we had treated it as a joke, putting glasses onto that great bulbous globe we believed to be its head, trying to create symmetry and physique in that matrix of sinews and segments and bold, dimpled ganglia by laying out pants and shirts and shoes around it. It was never very funny. We would strip that stuff away and then see it for what it really was. What it was really becoming.

The sun was turning a rich, eye-imprinting orange. The translucent pink and red surface of the Trilobite Man seemed to absorb that orange and hold it deep inside, where it escaped only as graceful, pulsing glimmers.



Kevin and Ralph showed up about half an hour after we did, brandishing a bottle of bourbon. Mike, Jack and Curt took off after a couple of convulsive, obligatory swallows.

It was soon apparent that Kevin wanted to kill off the bourbon in a hurry, and so we followed him about the island, taking an occasional swig, but generally listening to him rave about the injustice of the world and how tough it was to be a really obnoxious guy whom girls just didn't understand, and all the while the landscape around us, not even big enough to be a decent-sized backyard, seemed to open up to accommodate our wanderings, so that we stepped out from under the protection of the Great Weeper to look out on what, in our ever-drunkening state, seemed like a limitless peninsula along a still and shimmering sea. At its center was the dessicated corpse of the Trilobite Man, upon whose shell and bones and tendons the moonlight played dazzling, impossible tricks. The air around us filled with the buzzing songs of great, ancient insects, and those songs comforted us, gave us a sense of protection while the whiskey gave us a sense of strength and unrestrainable intuition.

Kevin killed off the bottle and almost immediately began puking his guts out. Ralph and I spent the next hour walking Kevin around, trying to figure out how to get him into good enough shape to walk home. In the end we had to give it up. He slumped in the long grass, moaning, his skin cold and wet and quaking with nausea. Ralph and I just sat there, listening to him mumble, occasionally laughing if something sounded funny, but mainly just staying quiet. We didn't talk about Marty. We didn't talk about Robin. Ralph had been my best friend since I'd moved here, and now I couldn't even bring myself to talk to him. And since he couldn't either, I guessed that he knew everything, which made it even more impossible to talk. Eventually we decided that Kevin wouldn't be able to go home tonight. I offered to look after him, so Ralph just gave a relieved shrug and left me there.

So I just sat there on the island. In between Kevin and me was the Trilobite

Man, whom I watched gleaming in the moonlight, an impossible configuration of forms, beyond life and death and art, like a great geological secret rising up from the depths of the earth offering some kind of elusive salvation for us alone. What was the Trilobite Man? Why didn't we ever ask that question anymore? Was it because we were embarrassed not to know, or afraid because we did know and did not dare mention it?

On the other side of the Trilobite Man, Kevin's drunken moaning seemed to take on an almost righteous tone, as though the complex forms glowing in the moonlight were a gigantic, labyrinthine temple, and the moans were the choruses of the throngs of believers moving within its shadows.

The ground underneath me rolled and breathed and quivered. The epicenter was the Trilobite Man and those swelling, dirge-like choruses were coming from Kevin, but it appeared that the whole thing, the unstable dance of the ground beneath me and the low, mournful chants, was directed solely at me, as though I had to clear something useless away from my eyes and ears in order to know what was truly happening around me.

I put my hand upon the Trilobite Man, running my palm across its knotted limbs and threads and over its swelling ganglia. It was warm and wet and sometimes it even appeared to throb and shudder.

After awhile, the sounds and rumbling grew so violent I wanted to get the hell off the island. But when I looked around me, I saw nothing beyond the shore, no river, no rocks, just an obstructing blackness that held me snug within it.

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KEVIN AWOKE SOON after sunrise. He stood up with a start and asked me what happened.

"I couldn't get you of the island, man. So I just let you stay here."

"And you watched over me all night? My hero!"

"Can you make it out of here all right now?"

"Yeah, I..." He winced and rubbed his forehead, and then his face. He looked down at the Trilobite Man. It was cold and polished

and lifeless.

"Oh, shit, did I have some weird dreams?"

"Really, Kevin? Like what?"

He stepped around the "body," looking at it as though for the first time.

"I don't know. Just some weird fucking dreams is all. Did you get any sleep?"

"Nah, I couldn't sleep."

And then we just hopped across the little rock bridge and back into the old world. I felt a strange, unaccountable loss the moment we hit shore.

### III

ON THE DAY Marty was finally well enough to go back to Cunningham Beach, I invited him over for dinner. When we got to my house my sister Jeannine was on the porch waiting for us. As soon as she saw us she began screaming.

Inside the house my mom was crying hysterically and shouting curses at Jeannine.

Marty stepped in our door, thinking he might use the phone to call his folks, but thought the better of it when he heard my mom and sister both filling the house with howlings of angry hysteria.

I'll be honest. My mom and sister had had a pretty fucked up time of it the past few years, what with my dad dying and leaving us with no money and Ronnie splitting and leaving Jeannine with no money and the two of them and me and Jeannine's little daughters all crammed into this house together against our will. There was never enough money, they were lonely, they'd never really gotten along, and the world just seemed to be dropping misfortune after misfortune into their paths, in the forms of humiliating jobs, old cars that never ran, insulting relatives and neighbors. But my problem with them always seemed to stem from the fact that in their dealings with me, I seemed to be the focus, the quintessential insult in their tragic lives. I was ugly, I was lazy, I was hairy, I was male, I was lazy, I was a horrifyingly bad influence on her two little girls, and most of all, I was just damned lazy. The only way

**...There were thousands of faces there, then none at all, as it twisted and arched its body, while two great appendages rose from its mass and grabbed for the moon, or maybe for something greater...**

they seemed able to end a fight with each other was to start in on me.

"I hope you're proud of yourself, you lazy rat!" one of them (it didn't matter whom) screamed at me as I stood there in the doorway, pondering the wisdom of asking what was for dinner. My mom just kept looking at me, shaking her tear-blotched head, and Jeannine kept pacing the house, slamming things, stopping every once in a while in front of me to deliver a new and improved threat and insult into my face.

"I should have seen this coming the moment I let you and mother move in with us! I should have known it! How *dare* you bring this kind of dirt and ruin into my house, how dare you show your face here!" As usual, I had no idea what she was talking about. "You're sick, Danny, and all of your friends are sick, and I wouldn't be surprised if you started killing them off the way you killed all your friends in Hillside!"

"Jeannine!" my mom cried, rushing forward to stop her and then thinking better of it and running off into the kitchen.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She got this crazy, I'm-going-out-on-a-limb-and-it-feels-great kind of smile on her face and she stepped forward, realizing she'd hit a raw nerve. Or maybe she was just letting loose a suspicion she'd had all along.

"Oh, Danny, you and me don't have to kid each other, do we?" Her voice was soft and almost seductive now. "I know about you."

"What do you know about me?"

"I know what you ARE!" screaming the last word into my face.

I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her until her face was reeling with terror.

"What do you know about me? Huh? FUUUUUU! AM I?"

I could hear Karen and Lucy crying in the background, Jeannine's eyes glazed wide and she let out a blood-curdling scream, a scream she meant to be heard all over the neighborhood.

I let go and started to run out the door.



I saw the two girls and I stopped and knelt to them. Lucy ran away, but Karen, who had just turned nine and was the closest thing I had to a friend in that house just stood there, looking at me with a sad, tear-smearred face.

"Karen, what do you think I am?"

"KAREN, YOU STAY AWAY FROM HIM!"

"Huh, Karen? Tell me, will you?"

"Oh, Danny," she sobbed, shaking her head sweetly at me. "Please go away."

I ran from the house. I ran all the way down Ellsworth Avenue until I reached the college field, where I collapsed on a hilltop and rolled around in the freshly cut grass, looking up into the violently carved clouds drifting over me. I had to go somewhere. The island? No, no, not after what my sister had said. I should have just gone home with Marty.

When I finally got up, I headed past the Field House and the playing fields, toward Robin Carlisle's house.

Robin answered the door. She looked around to see where her parents were and then stepped out onto the porch.

"Danny...what's up?"

I shrugged.

"Do you want to come in?"

"Not really. Can you come out? I've got to talk to you." I had seen her since summer school had let out. She and Ralph had been having all kinds of problems, and instead of that bringing the two of us closer together, it had pushed her away from the core of the group and almost out of my reach altogether.

She hesitated. Oh, god, she knew. Of course she knew.

"Okay. Can we go over to Curt's? Debbie and Sue are over there."

"Sure, sure, whatever."

She told her folks she was leaving and then we set off. I wanted so much just to spill it all out then, about how she was all I could think about, how I'd do anything for her, how I couldn't live without her and would never in all my life stop loving her. But Robin kept the conversation going all by herself, talking about how she'd had just about enough of that bastard Ralph and about a series of paintings she was going

to start and had I ever thought about doing something besides cartooning because she really thought I'd like oil painting and how badly she wanted to go away and study ballet while her father wanted her to go into the hard sciences, like her older sister.

So I just listened dutifully, interested in everything she said because the words emerging from her lips were just for me, as they'd been on all those walks home from summer school.

We passed by Burger King, where a bunch of kids, most of them older than us, were hanging around the bridge, looking scary. Someone from behind us shouted, "Nice tits, sweetheart!"

His friends all laughed. I whirled around, not even sure who'd said it. "Hey, FUCK YOU!"

Robin grabbed my arm. "Danny, come on."

Todd Delaney stepped away from the crowd. He was a couple of inches taller than me—about six foot—and was almost as skinny as I was, but he was nineteen and had been in jail already and had a reputation as a wild and cruel streetfighter.

"What did you say to me, little boy?"

I didn't answer.

He stepped up to me, displaying a mouthful of unbelievably snagged and discolored teeth. He reached up casually and grabbed hold of my nose, pinching it and refusing to let go. His friends all laughed.

Maybe he wasn't expecting me to punch him, or tackle him afterwards, because in the next few seconds I made Todd Delaney look real bad, sending his head cracking onto the concrete in front of the bridge. My fists were flailing and there seemed to be no doubt in my mind that I was going to put this low-life away. I don't know when or how it all turned bad on me, but after the dust cleared, I was dazed and bleeding and Todd had me on my feet, leaning me backwards over the bridge's edge with his palm on my face, telling me that if he ever saw me near the bridge again he was going to throw me over the edge.

And then he just hurled me away. I collapsed in the Burger King parking lot and rolled up to Robin's feet. There were about

a dozen of them back there, laughing. I looked at Robin, stood and walked away, for the moment not caring whether I ever uttered another word or looked into another face for the rest of my miserable life.

But Robin had her arm around me, she was patting my cheek and turning my face so she could look at me. She was not disgusted by my outburst or disillusioned at the poor showing I made in defense of her honor. When we got a couple of blocks away from the scene of my humiliation I stopped and turned to her, standing close and dropping my head towards her, almost close enough to kiss her.

"Robin, I can't go to Curt's. I just...not after..."

She took my hand. "All right. Where do you want to go?"

"I want to go to the island."

There were all kinds of conflicting forces at work behind her face now, straining and illuminating her features.

"Okay."

She let go of my hand, and did not say another word to me all the way there.

When I stopped onto the island I felt the air change, heard the strange but familiar calls of the birds and insects that seemed to live there and nowhere else in the world.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my fossil trilobite. *Thank you for finally pulling it all together, thank you for making it all clear, at last...*

#### IV

THE SOUNDS THAT rose from the shadows of the glimmering rocks and lush grasses and from the interlacing, gently rocking treelimps and from within the canopy of the Great Weeper were all living sounds—speaking, singing sounds that all seemed locked into a complex, repeating pattern carried on the breezes and then rising upwards into a sky so full of stars and lacey nebulae that it truly did resemble a lush fabric ceiling, the gentle, protective, dark-gloved palm of God sheltering us from the brutal but pathetically brittle world we had just left.

I tried sitting in the grass, but the moment I knelted, my ribs exploded with pain, so I stumbled and collapsed instead. Robin was

next to me in a second, helping me sit up. Her hand rested on my right forearm as she sat directly across from me, still looking up at the sky but pausing for longer and longer stares into my eyes.

"Oh, Danny, it's so beautiful. I've never seen a sky like this...Not even out in the country...It's almost..."

"No, not almost. It is." *Oh, shit, I thought, here it comes!* Robin, I just wish we never had to leave this island. I wish we could stay here forever, never have to face any of them ever again, never have to..."

I shook my head. It seemed that the number of things I needed to escape from was too enormous to express. Her hand tightened around my wrist. I looked over her shoulder and saw the Trilobite Man lying in the dirt, staring up into the stars with his black, gaping eyes.

"Oh, Danny. You're just so..." She let out a nervous laugh. "I don't know...messed up. But I know what you mean. Sometimes I don't understand what I'm doing, like everything in the whole world is just a big mistake, and I'm not a part of it, not even supposed to be a part of it. But every time I think about running away I start thinking...where would I run away to? I mean, where do I go if I don't want to do *any* of it?"

"You can stay here." Out beyond the Trilobite Man, beyond the Great Weeper, the landscape seemed to spread out forever, an unblemished patterning of island and ocean stretching out towards a haze blanketing horizon. "With me."

She took her hand away. The ground beneath me seemed to be moving, groaning lightly, as though awakening from a long sleep.

"I wish I could." She looked down at the water lapping against the rocks. "You're the only one in the world who understands me anymore. Sometimes I...feel so bad about you."

"Why?"

"Because of Debbie and Curt, because of Ralph, because of me. Danny, I know about you...the way you...I've been afraid all this time, because I'm just so crazy about Ralph and he just doesn't...want anything to do with me anymore. And you're always there. Your voice is always so soft for me,

and never for anyone else. It's like you're a completely different person for me. I just don't...deserve this."

I touched her cheek with the fingertips of my right hand. It was still a soft, babyish cheek. Her face glowed beneath all those lights from heaven while the moonlight broke up on the lapping water and reflected in her eyes as sharp, electrical glimmers. It seemed to me now that all I'd ever really wanted in this lonely fiasco of a life was this moment, to be alone with Robin and to prove to her all that she seemed unable to see.

"Robin, I adore you. I'm absolutely crazy about you." My palm went flat against her cheek and my fingers found the back of her neck, which Ralph had once inadvertently informed me was the most ticklish part of her body. She shut her eyes and I could feel her holding back the tremble.

Beneath me the ground rolled and shook in a series of shockwaves, spreading out from the enthroned grave of my only God. I had the trilobite fossil in my other hand. I gently placed it in her upturned palm.

"What's this?"

"It's yours, Robin. I want you to have it." She looked down at it, refusing to show me her face.

"It's the fossil. Your trilobite. You can't give me this, Danny. This is..."

She looked up suddenly, as though trying to scoop something out of me with those eyes.

"Robin, I'll be anything you want me to be. I know I'm a fuck-up, and I know the way those guys all talk about me, but that doesn't matter anymore. Everything is different because of you. I'm different, I swear I am. Just give me the chance to prove it to you."

"Do you love me, Danny?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me. I want to hear you tell me that."

"I love you, Robin Carlisle. Okay? Do you want to hear it again?" I was probably getting a bit drunk on all this. "I'll shout it so the whole world can hear it!"

And then she kissed me. Her lips and tongue were soft and warm at first, and then they seemed not to exist as separate

entities at all. It was just the two of us, our faces connected by the desperate fusing of soft tissues between and within us. I would have to say, all pecks and slobbers and hickies and drooling chewers aside, it was the first real kiss of my entire life. I could feel her exhale into my face, could hear her sigh and knew at once what that sigh meant as she scooted closer and put her arms around me.

And then we heard it. We snapped apart abruptly and looked around us at the glimmering island. The ground movement, which had seemed more like extensions of that momentum between us, had stopped suddenly. Behind Robin there was a swirling of light rising from the ground. I pulled her towards me and turned her around.

We both saw it stand up. Neither of us screamed or tried to stand or crawl away. We both just froze, no longer two individuals with lives and priorities or even identities. It seemed to suck all that away from us as it rose before the gigantic moon, so beautiful, so graceful, so much more than a collection of ribs and tendons and incomprehensible tangles.

Had I stood and tried to touch him, I'm not even sure if my hands would have rested upon any surface or whether they would have just drifted on through the intertwining strands of liquid light. He seemed possessed of no definitive, contiguous form, but rather seemed like a series of similar but distinct images cross-dissolving, one into the other, sometimes sharp and focused, sometimes obscured by swirls of haze and white, snaking smoke. At one moment he almost appeared to be a man, but that illusion was lost in the next moment, when he seemed to resemble a glass scorpion fish, a dimly perceived figure within a mass of sharp, threatening barbs. Forms seemed to grow and wrestle their way out of his core, each one overpowering the last, only to be pushed away or swallowed or dissipated by the next. But this was surely the Trilobite Man, the thing I had spent the summer lovingly unearthing with my bare hands, around which we'd spent so many days and evenings, withdrawing further and further from the world in which we were stuck, and deeper and

deeper into the world that was now so clearly weaved by the Trilobite Man himself, a world in his own image: a reflector of broken, dancing light, ever-changing, more hypnotic and all-encompassing as it drew power from...where? From the moon? From us?

Or was it me?

Oh, of course it was beautiful, weaving its slow, metamorphic dance beneath the full moon, and the beauty of the girl leaning against me, enwrapped in my arms, had not completely escaped me, but as I watched it and as I felt the fear and wonderment tearing my chest and head to pieces, I recognized this feeling.

And the moment I admitted this to myself, it seemed to twist in space and suspend within its anatomic maelstrom from the semblance of a face, a face that for an instant struck a familiar, horrible chord within me. But there were thousands of faces there, and then none at all, as it twisted again and arched its body while two great appendages rose from its mass and grasped for the moon, or maybe for something greater and farther and more impossible to reach than our simple, tarnished moon.

And then I heard the shouts. I tried to tell myself that they were merely another variation on the animal sounds that filled the night around me. But they were familiar sounds and they were getting louder by the moment. Robin and I sat up.

They were running along the pathway, then stumbling down the slope towards the river's edge, breathing in desperate gasps. I saw dark shapes splashing across the shallow river. I pushed Robin back under the drooping branches of the Great Weeper and then watched as Kevin and Ralph leaped up onto the island, their faces full of terror.

"What the hell are you guys so —"

And then I heard another shout.

"You can't hide from me, you dirty little motherfuckers!"

Amazing Grace. It couldn't be! I looked around. No glimmering canopy, no ocean stretching to the horizon. No Trilobite Man. And no moon.

He charged across the river, shouting like a man chasing the last barrier between

himself and starvation, hungry, savage and completely crazy. He fell into the river, roared as he pushed himself up and then staggered, breathless, dripping and wild-eyed onto the island.

In his hand was a baseball bat. My baseball bat.

"You sons-a-bitches think you're pretty damn funny, doncha? Huh? Doncha? Funny and smart and fast and just too fucking clever for me, huh?" The air filled with the stench of beer belches and body odor. I looked around and saw, for what seemed like the first time in my life, the flood lights illuminating Cunningham Beach, the headlights over on Aurora Avenue that backlit the power lines that ran along the road.

We did not run. We just spread out, trying to keep a little distance from each other and the bat. *This is how people die. How could I have forgotten this?*

"That's my bat, sir," I blurted, feeling a little nauseated and giddy. "That's my bat and I want it back!"

"You want it back, huh? Catch!" And then he just lunged forward. There was no mistaking his intent. I jumped out of his way and fell backwards over something that was just now rising from the ground.

The Trilobite Man was still the same flurry of glimmering lights and ghostly, transparent barbs in which solid flesh and bone seemed to dance a ferocious metamorphic dance. As an overall form he was vague and confusing, but there was no confusing what he did to Amazing Grace.

He skewered the fat man where he stood, driving a thick, pointed glass appendage into the man's crotch and up through his body until it emerged out of the broad—and broadening—forehead, where the tip seemed to soften, twisting around worm-like for a moment and then receding back into the head. By this time Amazing Grace's feet were off the ground, kicking in desperate attempt to reach the dirt again. The night filled with his screams, the screams of a man very much alive.

He was screaming for us to help him. I looked around. No more floodlights, streetlights, headlights, power lines, only a swollen moon low in the sky and a chorus

of laughing insects applauding Amazing Grace's performance.

The bat went flying out of his hand and caught Ralph in the temple. He went down. Robin was out from the Great Weeper and kneeling at his side.

Something that I swear to you *was not* me convulsed within me at that moment and I reached for the bat, the Louisville Slugger my dad had bought me for my twelfth birthday.

The mighty arm or leg or tail or whatever it was, twisted this way and that, playing with the thrashing, screaming man skewered upon it. Amazing Grace looked into my face and I could see, in the bloody mess spreading out over it, the desperate pleading of a small child.

I wiped the desperation off his face with the bat. I hit him hard enough to send any man flat on his back, but Amazing Grace had all kinds of support now and it was no problem for me to haul off and swing the bat a second time, as though his head were the juiciest slow-pitch in the history of softball. I did not miss. Once I followed through and turned back to him, there was very little left of Amazing Grace's head.

Somebody screamed. I guess it was probably Robin.

I began beating Amazing Grace's huge body until the bat splintered in half. Somewhere along the line, Kevin got ahold of the smaller half and we were both pounding away at the thing that only a moment ago had been a ferocious, drunken man whose only intent was to kill us. Now he was something less than a body. I remember the moment at which he plopped into the dirt but I don't think I understood what that meant at the time. I stabbed some part of him (it didn't really matter which part by this time) and began jumping up and down on him. I was screaming curses, but I don't know if they were made up of words. I only know that I was not alone in this. Kevin was there, too, screaming and tearing away at the flesh, trying to obliterate all traces of that thing that, unbelievably enough, had once been a man.

It was exhaustion that stopped us. I don't know who went down first. All I know is that I was sitting up and looking at what

seemed almost like a mirror image of myself. It was Kevin, sitting up and looking back at me. In between us, spread out through the rocks and dirt, was a bubbling, hissing mass of bone and viscera and—so it seemed—something more, something still alive, swimming noisily within it all.

I turned around and saw Robin and Ralph. Her head was bowed and she was crying. She refused to look at us. Ralph, covered with blood that was surely not his own, just stared at us, not in horror or disbelief or even anger.

Nothing happened. I stood up and all around me were those lights and automobile sounds and the smell of sewage. It had all drained away: the rage, the magic, as well as the Trilobite Man who had threaded it all together.

I looked at Kevin. "Why did you bring him here?"

"I didn't think he would follow us. I didn't think he could find us here."

I shook my head and motioned around me. "Find us *where?*"

And then I walked away, splashed through the shallows and up the slope and down the path and through town and onto Ellsworth and up to my porch and through the front door and up into the bathroom, where I washed it all away. When I went back downstairs, I found that my sister Jeannine was the only one up. She asked me if I wanted to split a frozen pizza with her. I said sure. We sat there together and she kept me up until four in the morning, explaining life to me.

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ALL FOUR OF us showed up at the beach the next day. Ralph and Robin were back together, in a renewed and somewhat defiant display of affection. Everybody seemed to be in good spirits and we spent an hour and a half over by the high-diver, showing off and generally making idiots out of ourselves.

Not a single word was mentioned about Amazing Grace or the Trilobite Man or the island. All that afternoon, and on almost every afternoon from then until school started, I was sure one of them would quietly bring up the subject to me, but no one did. I could sit across from any one of them and

talk for hours and I couldn't see it shadow their faces for even a single instant. It was as though it had never happened.

The local paper wasted a lot of ink speculating about the disappearance of Amazing Grace. A police investigation was conducted somewhere along the line, but it never came close to us, not even to Marty Hiat, who—had he ever considered it—would probably have had as much reason to kill Amazing Grace as anyone in the world.

Junior year was pretty good, got better as it went on, and I even managed to get over Robin. I grew another two inches and my hair grew another six inches and I guess you could say I turned into a real asshole. A slightly smarter version of Todd Delaney, I'm afraid.

Late the next summer, I went out to the island again, all by myself. Near the shade of the weeping willow there was a shallow form protruding from the ground. It might have been a skeleton, but whether or not it would have been a man's or not I could not say. It might have been Amazing Grace. It could have just as easily been the Trilobite Man. Maybe it was my imagination, or just a complicated tangle of tree roots riding along the ground level.

But there, alongside it, in stark contrast to the dry, clay-lightened dirt, was a small black form, no bigger than a quarter. I picked it up. My fossil trilobite. The creature's delicately etched impression had worn almost completely away. I rubbed it with my thumb and then dropped it into the enigmatic tangle at my feet.

When I stepped to the island's edge I looked up the slope and saw the barb-wire top of the chain-link fence that enclosed Cunningham Beach, saw the power lines stretched above it, and heard the shouting of kids at the beach and the drowning of hundreds of cars beyond it.

I turned back, retrieved the little black stone, and put it in my pocket.

—For Youmine.

A REVIEW, OF SORTS....

(Editor's note: the following is reprinted from THE SHINING FROM BEYOND, the newsletter of the Starry Wisdom Church, based in Providence, R.I. The reviewer is uncredited.)

**DEATHREALM—The Land Where Horror Dwells.** This magazine appears to be a quarterly digest, filled with substantive tales of what the editor presumably calls "horror and dark fantasy." Of the several issues this reviewer has seen, it must be said that this publication specializes in half-truths and occasionally blasphemous stories, purported to be fictitious in nature. The artwork and poetry that is interspersed with the prose can only be considered vulgar, and quite inappropriate for the eyes of the righteous. Most shocking are several photographs taken by one H. E. Fassel, due to the forbidden nature of their subject matter. Many of the "photographs" most assuredly are mere fakes, for the true subjects would never have allowed themselves in front of a camera, especially for so secular a publication.

Likewise, a number of the stories this magazine has run spread blatant falsehoods concerning this, our organization, such as a piece entitled *The Deprogrammer* by one nefarious Robert M. Price. The council of bishops has requested that a contract be taken out on Mr. Price's life, along with the following individuals, for various and perverse creations that malign our sacred Church:

**Mark Rainey**, the editor of **DEATHREALM**; **H. E. Fassel**, photographer; **William H. Pugmire**, author and poet; **Brian Miller**, writer; **Jeffrey Osler**, artist and writer; **Angie Wiedemann**, artist; **David Niall**, writer; **Margaret Frastley**, writer; **Fred Chappell**, writer; and **Joe R. Lamsdale**, writer; **Rodger Gerberding**, artist.

A more complete list is being compiled as further issues of this publication come under our scrutiny. As many of these subjects as possible should be taken alive for interrogation before their disposal.



## Foreign Bodies

By Jeffrey Thomas

**S**eagrave was pinned to the sofa under the weight of the steak he'd eaten after work with friends from the office, his head nailed to the sofa with the beers and rum and Cokes he'd drank before, during and after the steak. Now, masochistically, he assailed himself with music videos, alternating between three cable stations, occasionally peppering himself with a few minutes of cable news. The videos each contained at least a little jumpy, out of focus, mock eight millimeter home movie footage. Enough sexy women to populate an entire planet, apparently — though they all appeared to be cloned from a master set of five: a sexy blond, a sexy brunette, a sexy redhead, a sexy black, and a sexy oriental. On the news, less attractive, less disrobed Palestinian women fled from Israeli troops firing rubber bullets. Seagrave couldn't decide which of the two, videos or news, more appallingly reported the current state of affairs.

A blond ten year old boy, bent forward with intensity as he walked, his face a fist, screamed and ranted about God's love on the grounds of his southern school, followed by a loyal flock of camera and microphone wielders. Through the pain in his eyes, Seagraves reflected upon him, and the Palestinian women.

Seagrave sought to be unprejudiced, open-minded. He could appreciate that some of the videos he watched had artistic merit, or were simply entertaining, that not all the glamorous clones must be as shallow as their leather-clad cavoring suggested. He could feel sorry for the passionate, fleeing Palestinians, in a vague way, despite their stone-throwing and the stance of his country. The boy, however, he felt like slapping across the face. Everyone had their thresholds of tolerance, open-mindedness and disgust.

He dozed, roused to watch the endless videos, dozed, roused, unable to pull himself out of the sofa's soft grip for hours. It was just after four when at last he climbed

out of the cushioned pit, broke free of the pressing gravity of his sofa planet with its thick, smothering atmosphere.

His long languishment had sobered him, but not improved his physical discomfort. His throat was dry. He went to the kitchen to pour a glass of Coke (minus the rum).

No work tomorrow — Saturday — so he could sleep late. Work was getting strange. When he'd started there had been only a few blacks, Puerto Ricans, one Vietnamese. Since the owner had died and his wife assumed control, coincidence or not, there had come many more of these, and others. In the past week, three small, brown oriental men had joined the second shift to supplement the three who had joined the week before. "What's next?" the white workers said. They shunned the newcomers, muttered about them in disconcerted groups.

Seagrave tried not to let the others poison his attitudes. He was courteous, friendly to the foreigners. He would take breaks with some of the Puerto Ricans. The orientals didn't return his friendly overtures beyond a polite smile or two, but they were no doubt shy and wary, sensing the hate of the majority. And there was a group of dark-skinned men with Indian-sounding names (Iranians, swore some of the workers), several of whom were so glum and ungiving that Seagraves had resentfully stopped trying.

It wasn't that he was necessarily filled with love for all his fellow humans. In fact, he felt the tug of prejudice quite strongly... gradually worsening... but he was determined to fight it. He hated intolerance in others. It was negative, non-progressive, spiritually darkening to blindly hate. At least he felt guilty, tried to fight it; his efforts benefitted by his own identification with "outsider" types. He was shy, wary, often glum... something of an outsider type himself.

It wasn't an issue of racial or national superiority, anyway — it just boiled down to attitudes. He resented or feared groups whose attitudes toward him might be scornful. That could mean a group of Vietnamese; it could be a group of drug-worshipping young party types; a clan or beer-swilling macho men; or simply a clique of like-minded, back-stabbing gossip-mongers. Yet

## Deathrealm(?)

Dying is such sweet sorrow,  
Said Romeo to Juliet....

Capulet?

Or Montague?

Our parents have forbid

Having a kid

By either name....

Shame!

Well — How's about tomorrow,  
Montalet?

Or Capugue?

We're Hot!

Dying is not  
for me and you.

— Mary Elizabeth Counselman

once he got past the intimidation, he might find himself befriendng or befriended by one or more of the druggies, the macho men, the gossipers. He could get past that wall. Though he had no close friends, everyone on second shift seemed to like him, or at least find him inoffensive. It was, ultimately, Seagrave's desire to get along amicably with everybody.

The interior of his home was a private place none of these people had seen, however. The framed oil paintings of landscapes both real and mythical, the barbed and jagged pen and inks....

He no longer had the patience or desire for more prosaic subject matter—portraits of the children and pets of his co-workers—mostly because those who did pay him (many had promised but never had) paid him ridiculously low amounts, assuming, no doubt, he was an idiot savant who wouldn't mind accepting five dollars for a drawing that took anywhere from two to six hours to create. An old lady at a previous job would bake him a loaf of banana bread in exchange for a drawing of a grandchild, and that he didn't mind; her talent in exchange for his, something made with her time and hands. But early this week he had been asked by a co-worker for a colored drawing, more than what he could sketch at work during his break.

Sketching for people at break, a cartoon or caricature, had been the recent extent of his effort. But this was a comical sort of drawing, in a dark way, a cartoon, not a portrait from a photograph, and Seagrave had accepted the job.

In it, he portrayed the worker, Don, as a Rambo-type, per instruction, overly muscled, bleeding from cuts, wearing a headband, gripping an M-16 with a rocket launcher and a bayonet. Seagrave had found a picture of the gun, but not with a bayonet, and so invented one. The finished gun looked like the rocket launcher would blow the bayonet off the barrel, but that was Don Rambo's concern.

Don, a fair likeness from memory, was to be spearing a Libyan terrorist in the chest, but as things evolved he ended up impaling the terrorist through the throat. An upraised hand was folding claw-like in

on itself, a spider impaled on a pin, the eyes bulging in the dark-skinned face. The man half lay on the ground, bullet holes in one arm and one leg—Seagrave's own embellishment. The picture had impact, a realistic energy, despite the cartoonish approach. He licked his finger, then rubbed the ink blood on the terrorist's shirt to make it blur like it was really soaking cloth.

Don was a hyper-patriot, but certainly not a mindless one. Seagrave found him remarkably intelligent, informed, he could at any moment spout harrowing statistics about the activities of drug-users, terrorists, Communists. And Democrats. He had nearly pounced and ripped out Seagrave's throat one time when Seagrave denounced Oliver North. In the past, Don had asked Seagrave to portray him, in a break-time sketch, as a Dirty Harry-type blasting a drug-user based upon a Dead Head-type at work. Seagrave, not fond of that type either, had enjoyed drawing that one.

Don had asked to be shown killing a Libyan in this picture, so Seagrave had given the victim curly black hair, the typical bushy mustache, the large nose, dark skin. And—on a strange impulse—suggested a pocked, rough complexion.

Two of those glum, dark-skinned men at work had faces which looked as if they'd been hit with bird shot. But they had *Indian* sounding names, not Libyan. Don had called them Iranians to Seagrave, but he knew better, and Seagrave did, too. Don didn't care for the strange, dark-skinned men, but he hadn't asked for the Libyan terrorist to be portrayed as one of them, in the manner of the literal Dead Head ("Sorry, punk," ran that caption, "I didn't mean to blow your mind") in the Dirty Harry sketch. But the resemblance turned out to be uncanny.

Don loved the picture. He told Seagrave he would hang it up in his apartment. But he asked Seagrave to be careful about who saw it before he picked it up at the end of the night. He didn't want any of the dark-skinned men to see it. He had asked Seagrave immediately upon seeing the picture if he had purposely used the dark men as a model. A few other people whom he

trusted to view the piece asked him the same question—every one of them. Seagrave assured them all that he had consciously intended no such resemblance.

Still, he could almost *remember* the choice when, with a few deft strokes of his pen, he broke up the complexion of the dying terrorist to look like it was pocked.

Seagrave rinsed out his glass, set it in the sink. A squeak came from the kitchen behind him...like the funny squeak that always preceded the ringing of his phone. For a moment he tensed up, expecting a ring to follow, forgetting how late it was. But the next squeak was a scratch—long, drawn out—against the glass of the window behind him. He lived on the second floor, above a couple of politely unfriendly yuppies.

He didn't even turn to confront it—it had been getting more common with the blooming of May. A branch. He'd been meaning to open the window and trim it...but so far, it hadn't bothered him enough to prompt any action, despite the finger-nails-on-blackboard quality of the longer scratches, and the persistence on windier nights when it had sounded like the tree wanted him to let it in.

Maybe tomorrow (later today, actually) he'd take a look at it.

He'd better go to bed soon, before the sun looked in and caught him still awake, he thought. He didn't dare get too close to the quiet TV or insidious comfort of the sofa—Dorothy's beckoning poppyfield. Time to surrender to his real bed like a regular person. He was very nearly too tired to get ready for bed, but he could still taste that steak and knew he must brush his teeth.

The brushing sound shut out most of the squealing he heard from the kitchen window—a breeze must have come up—but not the distinctive sound of the glass and aluminum storm door banging shut downstairs in the back hall.

It didn't *slam* shut, but had been released to swing shut by itself. This had happened before, on windy nights, particularly in winter; the door had no knob, and never completely closed. But was it *that* windy? Seagrave leaned across his bathtub to

gaze down from the tiny window at the back door. He reached behind him to pull off the light by the mirrored medicine cabinet, so that his head wouldn't be silhouetted in the window. He moved his face close to the glass, stepping into the tub to do so.

In the time it took for his eyes to adjust to the blackness, he felt vulnerable, as if a bullet might be fired from some bushes below up into his face through the glass. Finally the blackness molded into shapes: the back door, its stoop. The outside light was off. Nothing looked strange. But there was no sign of any wind, either.

Seagrave switched his gaze to the Yuppies' car. Sometimes Mr. Yuppie went out to it when he'd forgotten his cigarettes or something.

The car dozed in its blanket of darkness, an unbroken shell.

**...He was through his threshold, into his apartment and slamming the door shut. He bolted it...it was a very thick door. Still, he didn't allow himself to remain close to it....**

Friendly came to mind—a wild, stray cat Seagrave had nick-named. He'd put food and water out for Friendly, who would rub against his legs and liked to be petted but not picked up. One night there had been a scratching at Seagrave's kitchen door, and he had opened it to be shocked by a flashing movement: the cat, similarly startled. He must have pawed the storm door open enough to slip through and sniffed his way upstairs into the little hall where Seagrave kept the cat food bag rolled up.

But Friendly was dead, struck down by an unfriendly car conveying Yuppies, no doubt in a hurry to get to their computers. Seagrave had spotted him in the gutter, buried him in the backyard. Sentimentally, he had buried Friendly's dishes with him, one with food and one with water, offerings to an Egyptian cat god to see him on his way.

## Foreign Bodies

Well, maybe Friendly hadn't made it all the way to Heaven, and his food and water had run out. Maybe Seagrave had buried a comatose cat, and now it had awakened from its trance...eaten all its goodies.

And now wanted more.

Seagrave's artistic imagination was in need of some sleep. Friendly had been dead for nearly a month now. He should concentrate on more realistic, dangerous possibilities...such as someone human and mortal slipping into the back hall, either to break into the Yuppies' apartment—or to creep up here, stealthily, assuming

his mouth, moved into the kitchen to his back door.

His hand hesitated on the knob, but only for a moment. He considered taking

up a weapon, but dismissed that as nonsense. He was tired, that was all. He swung the door open.

There was nothing beyond but still, quiet darkness. Seagrave was going to leave it at that, but stood at the threshold for a moment, listening. No sounds down in the Yuppies' hall. No creaking advance on his stairs. Still, he decided to step out into his hall to take a look down. He



everyone was asleep in this hulking dark house.

The *wind*, part of his mind insisted, trying to calm the quiet, frozen panic that coiled tensely inside him as he stood deer-like in his bathtub, listening, his lips caked with toothpaste.

Nothing. Silence. A lone car whooshed by the front of the house. This sound helped his body untense. No doubt he'd heard something just as real and commonplace as that. Like a branch at a window, a cat at the door. The wind.

Seagrave stepped from the tub, rinsed

reached for the dangling lamp string. The ugly yellow of a moth-repelling bulb came on at the head of the stairs, and Seagrave leaned around the wood partition that formed the wall of his narrow hall to take a peek down the now illuminated rear stairs.

The creature was poised halfway up, frozen there, its eyes on his. Seagrave might have withdrawn more quickly had it been a human with a knife in hand, but he remained that extra second or two just to assimilate what his eyes beheld. His disbelief nearly blotted out his terror. It was

**Jeffrey Thomas**

like something that had pulled itself out of a half dozen of his weirdest sketches to fuse into one form.

It was basically humanoid in form, but there was a suggestion of the spider-like in its pose, in the long, almost fleshless arms and legs, in the strange reverse angles of their joints. It was naked, hairless, a vivid, glistening red, as if the skin had been stripped away. The expression on the alien face couldn't have been a relaxed one—the flesh contorted across the bones, the toothless black gums bared in a twisted grimace. The nose, rather than projecting from the face, was a deep indented groove, and the eyes were black with white pupils, and the ears were black with white pupils, concave rather than convex—expressive cups full of unknown feeling.

Seagrave nearly tripped over himself in his backward lurch, his spin, his plunge into his home. He knew now, discovered, that it would surely hurl itself up the remaining stairs after him, flinging out its gibbon-like arms to seize him by the hair, drag him backwards into its embrace.

It didn't. He was through the threshold, into his apartment and slamming the door shut. He bolted it, turned the lock switch in the knob. It was a very thick door. Still, he didn't allow himself to remain close to it—he backed into the center of the kitchen.

There was no pounding at the door, no sound of anything scrambling up the stairs. No sound but the branch tracing its fingers on the window.

He didn't have an M-16 with a grenade launcher, but he did have a .38 snub-nosed revolver. Unfortunately, he hadn't taken it out in the woods for practice, and thus hadn't bought bullets for it, in four years.

He had a .22 rifle, but he'd lent it to a friend and gotten it back broken. Something with the bolt? Anyway—he didn't have any rounds for that, either.

In 100 many movies they went for the phone before they armed themselves. It would be out of commission, and then the door would slam open behind their backs. Seagrave rushed into the bedroom, behind the door found his old BB rifle...drew it from its box. The tiny copper spheres rattled in it. Better than nothing. With enough

shots, he'd cut soda cans entirely in half with it, and he could dent the door of the old refrigerator in the back shed with it. The more pumps, the more power. He chambered a BB and pumped the gun to its maximum power, the last few pumps a strain that made the rifle feel heavy with its coiled tension, like a loaded crossbow.

All the while Seagrave listened but heard nothing new. And as he pumped the rifle he allowed his mind to register more of the details his eyes had photographed in those few seconds he had viewed the creature.

A smooth yellow stick protruded from the thing's shoulder, the end broken off, probably by the creature in a frantic attempt to pull the stick out of its thin red flesh. Seagrave felt sure what the yellow stick was. He had taken archery in high school. An arrow, the shaft broken. A few months ago, he had gone to some sand pits with Don and another casual friend from work. He'd had his BB gun, the other friend a .22 pistol, and Don a power bow, with pulleys or whatever they were to give the bow more spring. Like Rambo's bow, Don had said, firing arrows into a plank with a human outline chalked on it by Seagrave the artist. "Here's a chopstick for ya, gook," Don had hissed. *Whizz-thunk*. Okay, he had his weapon. He wouldn't miss the head, as the creature's last victim had. He'd go for the face, those inverted eyes, and he was a good shot. He couldn't help but wonder at the fate of whoever had fired that arrow. Couldn't be good. Now, to use the phone? Would it work? He hadn't best call the Yuppies downstairs first, hadn't he?—wake them up and get them to lock up? No...no. They would have already locked up for the night; *nobody* slept behind an unlocked door in America today. An attempt to warn them of the monster's proximity would only serve to send them, scoffing, into the hall. They were as safe as possible, for the time being.

Would the police scoff, too? Hang up on him? Well, he could simply say an intruder was outside his door, without getting specific. Upon seeing its horrible form, they would blast it without question.

Shoot first and ask questions later. Waa! That what had happened with the arrow?



It was hard to think. Seagrave's terror was a humming machine inside him. What the hell was it? Not the victim of some hideous accident, not with such unearthly distortions. An escaped freak of nature... some runaway scientific experiment? A supernatural entity—a demon? Seagrave ran a trembling finger down a mental check list. He kept coming back to his original choice. An extraterrestrial. An alien.

He was afraid to even return to his kitchen. It had to be directly outside his door now that it was discovered, listening for him as he listened for it. Unless it had back-tracked, fled before he could call for help. But if it were going to flee—or attack—wouldn't it have done so the moment he'd set eyes on it?

He hadn't heard it scramble up after him, or down the stairs and out the door. It didn't seem have to budged at all.

What did it want, then?

Because it was horrifying to look at, revolting, he had assumed its intentions were horrifying and revolting. But what if they weren't? He had taken the arrow to mean that some poor victim had gotten off one shot in self-defense before being rent apart. But what if someone had been terrified at this unearthly apparition and reacted violently rather than trying to communicate?

Seagrave thought of that movie about the little boy who found the ugly-cute extraterrestrial hiding on his property. Even if that creature were found cowering in some macho thug's garage behind his motorcycle, wouldn't he run inside and fetch his power bow? Seagrave doubted that many aliens (and he believed in such things) would be Spielberg cure. There had to be plenty even more hideous than this one...but that didn't make them evil. Perhaps there was even a race which looked quite beautiful, but who would be the first to seize your head without provocation and twist it off your shoulders.

Many people would have been screaming, bouncing off the walls from room to room by now. Was it that he had such a fertile imagination that even such a sight as this wasn't fully alien? At any rate, despite

his humming terror and his confusion, his own level-headedness amazed him.

In his youthful play, his mind had conjured up aliens less frightening in appearance than this one; more bubble-headed, graceful—almost celestial. His boyhood imagination, though, wouldn't have been able to dream up such a nightmare. His adult imagination could. But in his boyhood fantasies, he reacted bravely, rationally to alien confrontations. He must follow his own example, not jump to conclusions. He must force himself not to be prejudiced.

He could understand why someone had thunked an arrow into it—it didn't have to have been a macho thug. Still, he was more open-minded than that. It was fairly obvious now. It was in agony. It needed help. It was like the lion with the thorn in its paw from that old story—the man (Dando-something, Greek) had pulled it out, and later in the arena, a prisoner, had been spared by the same lion.

Seagrave padded slowly back to the kitchen, still carrying the BB gun. He didn't want to make a sound yet, but the old linoleum creaked and he froze in his tracks by the stove.

There was his phone, on the wall by the squeaking window. So near, so tempting. He could turn the situation over to more capable, more decisive hands. Yes, but decisive in what way? He knew only too well that policemen would shoot the creature on sight.

No, he mustn't. He was afraid because it was ugly to him, because it was unknown. If it had been the Elephant Man on his steps, would it be okay to shoot him simply because his ugliness was an unexpected shock at four in the morning?

This argument broke his paralysis. He started forward again. He passed the telephone.

The creature needed his help. He would take it in. Maybe then he would take photographs to the authorities, to doctors if it needed that, to prepare them. He would be famous then—maybe on two planets.

The arrow-launcher had misunderrated. Seagrave, at first, had misunder-

stood. But what Seagrave never would have admitted to himself at this self-congratulatory moment was that if the stranger outside had proven to be a wounded black man, he would have phoned the police without hesitation. Whatever the circumstances were. And kept the chain bolted until they got there.

The BB rifle was heavy in his right hand as he reached for the door with his left. There was no masking the sound of the bolt being drawn back, so he didn't try. Maybe it was best to let it know he was coming so it wouldn't be surprised into impulsive action...and also so that, now that it expected a close encounter, Seagrave couldn't let himself back down.

The bolt was drawn back...he lowered his hand to the knob. He hesitated, but only for a second. He had to ride his momentum. He gave the knob a twist and tugged the door wide open.

It was there directly before him, two steps away, the face contorted in that unknowable expression, lips drawn back from black toothless gums...and the horrid visage rooted Seagrave.

It lurched forward a step as if it might fall, a long-fingered hand floating up between them. Yes, it had to have been injured. It was reaching for him. Despite his revulsion, Seagrave was moved. Poor, tormented soul. Smiling tremulously to reassure it, he extended his left arm to take its hand in his own. The universal gesture of friendship and acceptance.

It was his right wrist it abruptly seized, however—in a squeezing, crushing grip. The BB gun dropped heavily. Seagrave cried out. He meant to protest that it misunderstood his actions...even as the creature pulled his captured hand to its face and took the hand in its mouth.

It had no teeth, but the black gums were

sharp like a squid's beak. A wet crunch. Seagrave screamed. A burst of steam blew out of the corners of the creature's mouth.

When Seagrave yanked his arm away he had no right hand. The stump ended in a blackened steaming twist, like the end of a sausage. With a high wail, he slammed the door in the monster's face, then locked it swiftly with his left hand. He looked again, disbelieving, at his right hand's absence. His drawing hand.

He was too horrified to recall that as a boy he'd had fantasies about utterly hostile aliens, as well, that he had done battle with, firing plastic guns at them. Without hesitation or question.

He turned toward the phone and the window beside it exploded. A head thrust through the curtains. Glass stuck in it. This second creature also had concave eyes, the indented nose. But unlike the first, it had pimple-growths on its cheeks, like warts. Like pockmarks turned inside out.

Whatever they were, they knew him from work. They had turned their dark skins inside out and set out in the night—demons? Aliens? Or...this was their natural condition, and they reversed their skins to masquerade as human. Who knew how many of them lurked out there? Maybe populating whole countries....

At least Don had gotten one arrow off before they got him.

Glass shattered in another room. Still another...

They had found the picture in Don's apartment. He had said he meant to hang it up, after all. Seagrave had been proud. He wanted to tell them that the similarity was a coincidence, it wasn't meant to represent them, a coincidence, just a coincidence.

But he couldn't, and they swarmed around him.



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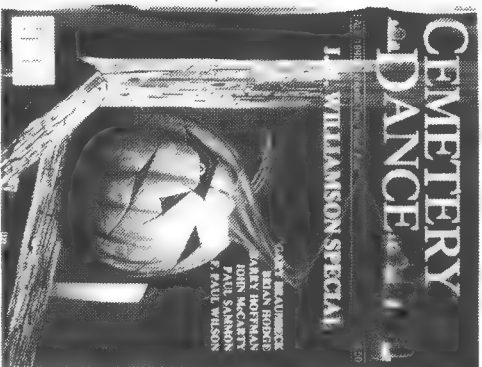
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# Death's Door

## Magazine Reviews

By Andrea Locke

**CEMETERY DANCE**, Vol 2, Issue 4 • Richard Chizmar, PO Box 858, Edgewood, MD 21040 • 8 1/2" x 11", 96 pages • \$4.00 single copy, \$15.00 4-issue sub.



**AFTER HAVING SEEN** a few previous issues of this magazine, "unimpressive" is as polite a term as I'd have been obliged to apply to it. I didn't see volume 2, issue #3, which I understand also had a full color cover, but after reading this most recent entry, it's time for me to eat some mud. I found that not only has Chizmar begun to pick up some respectable fiction—which even in the "all pro" issue reeked of septic water—but the visual product has surpassed its earlier **HORROR SHOW**-clone syndrome and moved upward to even beat out its father-figure in design. Charles Lang's cover art is quite eye-catching.

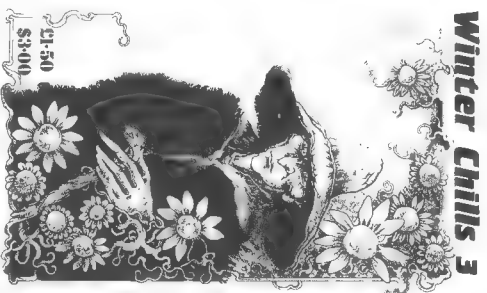
Opening with the suspense-filled, beautifully-written *Depth of Reflection* by David L. Dugins, the issue takes off with a number of worthwhile stories, as engrossing a collection as most anthologies I've seen in recent days. Artist Alan Jude Summa provides the bulk of the illustrations in the issue, and virtually without exception, his drawings are the magazine's crowning grace. Allen Koszowski also contributes a

few of his trademarked stipple drawings, all showing style and energy.

Gary Braunbeck's novella *To His Children in Darkness* exemplifies why he has become one of my favorite authors of late—the story he has coming up in **DEATH-REALM #15** is something to look forward to. David Niall Wilson's *Mole* is as fun as a story can be, dripping (literally) with atmosphere. And Brian Hodge's novel excerpt *Nightlife* is beautifully wrought, giving me plenty of reason to seek out this book when it reaches the shelves.

It's been a long time since I've been excited by a magazine, and frankly, having been a little put out by the earlier issues of this one, it makes it all the more impressive that Mr. Chizmar has taken such broad steps forward. Highly recommended.

**WINTER CHILLS**, Issue #3 • The British Fantasy Society, edited by Peter Coleborn • 46 Oxford Road, Acocks Green, Birmingham, B27 6DT England • 6" x 8 1/4", 46 pages • \$3.00.



**WINTER CHILLS #3** is an organ of the British Fantasy Society, and is an attractive oversized digest package, with production values that, while good, are not striking. What is extraordinary about this publication is the generally excellent level of storytelling of the six stories contained in this (annual) issue, and the remarkable artwork, both on the cover (by Jim Pitts) and for the

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interior illustrations.

My favorite story in this issue was not by a British author, but was *Safe House* by Colorado writer Steve Rasnic Tem. No Blochian piece here of the bad guy getting his come-uppance; this story of domestic terrorism and the banality of violence is a true study of horror.

While *Safe House* did not make the cut for **YEAR'S BEST HORROR**, another story in this issue did: *The Earth Wire*, by Joel Lane. Again, the level of writing here is phenomenally good, and the horror in this tale comes from the possible alternate world setting and the deterioration of order. A most disturbing work.

*We Can Get Them For You Wholesale*, was by Neil Gaiman who is best known for his comic work for DC's **SANDMAN**. Here, Mr. Gaiman tells a comical story of hired guns and revenge gone awry. It bears the overhanded irony of the kinds of stories that were written for the old pulp **UNKNOWN** long, long ago. I liked it.

A less enjoyable tale here was a well-written, but exceedingly confusing story entitled *When the Bucket Stilled*. It's concerned with a nun and her (sexual) relationship with a demonic figure who may or may not be Satan himself. There are some intensely disturbing images contained here, but I must admit that I was lost by the end.

*Sannahel's Summons* was an overlong work by veteran Ian Watson, and I would have thought it one of Watson's throwaways save for the fact that it's reprinted from a 1984 issue of **FANTASY BOOK**. It was, overall, a waste of time; and I think one girl/demon/sex story was enough for a single issue of any magazine.

The only really poorly conceived tale here was the longest one: *The Authors of Pendragoth* by William Thomas Webb. It dragged on and on to its quite predictable conclusion, and is the kind of thing I expect to see in any two-bit mimeographed fanzine. However (and this brings me back to the artwork), the illustration by Martin McKenna for this story was *horrifying*! The thing was appropriately painful to look upon, and it almost made reading the story worthwhile.

If you can spare the change, buy this

issue of **WINTER CHILLS**. I will certainly seek out the next one.

**ELDRITCH TALES #23** • Crispin Burnham, 1051 Wellington, Lawrence, KS 66049 • 6" x 9", 116 pages • \$6.00 + \$1.00 postage/single copy, \$20.00 + \$4.00 postage/4-issue sub.



A Magazine of Weird Fantasy \$6.00

**I WOULD LIKE** to give a glowing review of **ELDRITCH TALES**. It is certainly pretty to look upon and gives the appearance of being a fully professional publication. What is really amazing about the stories here is that they are by authors from whom I can reasonably expect superlative efforts, but who failed here to deliver. Can it be that they are using **ET** as a dumping ground for stories they can't sell elsewhere? Sadly, it seems so. Real clunkers are delivered by such writers as Bentley Little (whose appeal in the small and semi-pro press I have yet to fathom), John MacLay, Ken Wisman, Ronald Kelly, and most surprisingly, from A. R. Morlan. Here is a pot-pourri of blandness, confusing plots, and just plain bad writing.

Also contained in this issue are stories by writers who I (unfortunately) often see in the small press, and was not terribly surprised by.

(Continued on page 56)

# Full Moon Hearth

## By Barb Hendee

I remember standing in the middle of our old trees that summer, breathing the warm evening air and wishing it would go on forever. There was a lily-checked frog pond behind our house, and I loved to lean against a tree, listen to the frogs' songs and think about my day as the sun went down.

I heard Raymond's booted feet coming down the path, but gazed out into the dusky air and pretended not to.

"Lisa," his voice sounded behind me. "Come on, honey, it's getting late."

Unable to remain deaf, I turned to meet him—his face quiet and pinched, his overalls dusty from the new set of shelves he'd been sanding for the Sherman's.

"Sorry," I whispered. "I'm coming."

Tonight was just another full moon. Somehow, I thought that as time passed and I grew up, it wouldn't bother me so much. But I was seventeen and Raymond was twenty-eight, and these nights never seemed to get any easier. We never seemed to feel any different.

The soft songs of frogs and crickets did little to comfort me. I felt bad because Raymond had had to come looking for me. A tiny piece of me wanted to hold his hand, but I didn't try. He wouldn't want to be touched until tomorrow morning.

"You keep the doors locked," he whispered, "and don't answer it for nobody."

"You say the same thing every month. Don't I always lock it?"

We reached the cabin, and I felt that same odd longing to touch him. His face melted into a tight mask of pain and fear. A small trickle of sweat slid down his forehead as he backed away.

"Just keep it locked. I'll see you in the morning."

"Is it bad?" Some nights were worse than others.

"Yeah. It's gonna be bad this time. Get in the house."

Without watching him leave, I slipped

into our cabin, secured the deadbolt, and dropped a two-by-four into metal brackets which made the front door virtually impassable from the outside. Ray had started the evening fire as usual, but I hadn't cooked any supper. He never ate on wolf-nights; it made him nauseous. I went into the kitchen to hunt up some bread and cheese.

We called this place a cabin, but it was really just a fixed-up shack. Not a dump—the inside had a rustic, comfortable look. Raymond was the best carpenter in Latah county, and our poor, old house had been salvaged by his talents.

I peered out the window. The darkening forest lay empty. Once, when I was little, I'd told him that the growing and sniffing sounds at dusk frightened me. His face had gone white and ever since he'd made it a fanatical habit to get as far from the house as possible before changing.

These nights were lonely. Good thing they only happened once a month. I took my cold dinner back to Ray's rocking chair, covered my legs with an afghan, and stared into the yellow, crackling depths of the fire. Abrasive, red brick made the flames seem brighter, and I didn't bother turning any lights on.

This place had been my home since the age of seven. We'd run from South Dakota to Idaho ten years earlier—a nightmare ride of silence. Our father had been—oddly enough—a professor of English Literature. I should probably have a better idea of what really happened, but I was so little, and the pictures in my head are hazy.

My mother abandoned us when I was two, and my father consumed enough alcohol to ruin his career. None of that mattered to my welfare though, since Raymond took care of me. He cooked my meals, washed my clothes, and braided my hair. My first trip to kindergarten was travelled with his hand around mine. Teachers never called or held conferences with my dad, just with Raymond. It didn't seem strange to me, but like I said, I was only seven when we left.

The wolf-nights started with a hunting trip. Ray and two of his friends had saved extra money for a year to drive over to Montana in October. Since Dad couldn't be trusted to care for me alone, Ray took

## Barb Hendee

me to fat Aunt Lillie's. Standing on her porch, I begged him not to leave.

"He was attacked by some animal in those hills! That's what happened. You can be sure he's gonna pay for the extra food you've eaten too. Don't know why I let myself get talked into this in the first place. Should have let that drunken father of yours own up to his responsibilities, I should've."

I waited for him quietly. My sense of time was vague, but I remember crying myself to sleep after he had been gone for what seemed like months. Finally my aunt sat me on a kitchen chair—her dirty face disgusted. She wasn't wearing nylons and the varicose veins in her legs bulged out like green and purple plums.

I started to cry softly, and she sent me to my room. My young, unformed mind pictured wild animals tearing Raymond apart, and I couldn't sleep or stop shaking. A few days later, Aunt Lilly's voice rose to the ceiling, shouting swear words that I wasn't supposed to hear, and I ran out to see Ray in her living room. He had large, white bandages taped around his throat and his left arm.

"Your brother's had an accident. That's why I've been burdened with you these past weeks."

"You're home!" I ran to him, knowing that all was right with the world now that he was back. He gave Aunt Lilly some money and we left.

Weeks? How long is that? But of course I didn't ask. Aunt Lillie was a firm believer that children should be seen and not heard. "He's in a hospital in Montana, but I spoke to him this morning, and he'll be home to get you in a few days."

I suppose things were normal from that moment until the first full moon. Waking in the middle of the night, I heard my

Watching the flab roll down her enormous legs, I gathered my courage and whispered, "What happened to him?"

I suppose things were normal from that moment until the first full moon. Waking in the middle of the night, I heard my





father's terrified screams. Violent crashing sounds made me pull the covers over my head, and the little night light Ray had bought for me flickered through the blankets as the walls shook. Growling and roaring echoed through our old house, but I lay still as a stone...waiting for Raymond.

When the sounds ceased, I decided to make a run for his bedroom and dashed toward my door. A sickly smell hit me in the hallway, but I kept running. Finding nothing but torn covers on his empty bed, I began crying and stumbled out into the kitchen.

It was red.

The floor, walls, and counters were bright red and what was left of my father's body lay in a heap under the table. The back door had been torn off its hinges.

I don't remember any more until the next morning.

"Lisa, grab my neck," Raymond whispered in a funny voice. The room was just getting light, but I couldn't seem to wake up. His strong arms lifted me, and the sweat from his body smeared on the side of my face. His breath smelled like vomit.

"Where are we going?"

"Shhh, baby," he murmured. "We've gotta go for a drive."

He laid me down on the seat of his dented, Chevy pick-up and ran around to the driver's side.

I rolled over to pull his hunting jacket off the cab floor. "The kitchen's all red."

He hadn't answered me.

So long ago.

By the time I was seventeen my full moon nights passed peacefully, sitting in the rocker, staring at the fire and remembering. The house was always so still, only the clock on the mantle making any sound at all. As usual, I rocked until the fire burned low and then fell asleep in his chair.

\*\*\*\*\*

I WOKE THE next morning to the sound of Raymond retching outside my window. Without bothering to put on my robe, I ran out the door and around to the back of the house.

He was naked, crawling in the dirt, gagging on his own bile.

"Lisa..."

Looking up from the ground in agony, he tried to reach out for me and collapsed into convulsions.

Dropping to my knees, I tilted his head up to make sure his wind pipe stayed clear. He'd been right the night before. I hadn't seen him this sick in nearly a year.

"Try and get your arm around me."

He did try, but I had to drag him toward the house. I'm not a frail woman. Ray is 6'2" and my head reaches his chin. Years of stacking wood and carrying water had strengthened my arms.

After pulling him through the front door, I didn't bother taking him to his bed but laid him on the couch. This was a familiar scene—my part well rehearsed.

"It'll be all right..."

I got a bowl of water to wash his face with and a bucket for him to throw up in. His body was racking, so I covered him with an afghan more for comfort's sake than anything else.

"Rinse out your mouth," I murmured, holding a glass of cold water to his lips.

He managed to sip a little and swish it around in his mouth before spitting into the bucket. He lay back and seemed to calm down.

"Better?"

He nodded, but his teeth were still clicking together. Picking up a wet rag, I washed his face and chest. This was the only time we ever touched each other. In his helplessness, he clung to me, not having any other choice.

"Can you breathe? Are the cramps easing?" My questions memorized...mechanical.

Managing a nod, he lifted his hands into view. "Is there any blood?"

"No."

He had an almost pathological fear of hurting something during black outs and always made me inspect him for blood. Sometimes I'd wash it away before he gained coherence and lie to him.

"You're going to be down for a couple of days, Raymond. Should I drive out to the Sherman's and tell them their shelves won't be done till the weekend?"

"Wait till later." He curled down against

a pillow. "Just let me get some sleep and see how I feel tonight, okay?"

"Sure. Do you want some tea?"

"No. I'm tired."

His muscle spasms were growing less frequent, and I knelt down beside him to rub his back.

"The worst's over. Just close your eyes."

Twenty minutes later he was resting on his own, so I decided to get on with my day. I always stayed home from school after a wolf-night for obvious reasons. Besides caring for Raymond, it gave me a chance to get some things done. Since we were into late summer I had planned to spend the day putting up appleauce.

After getting dressed, I wove my heavy, brown-black hair into a braid and went out to the barn. We used our barn for odd things since farm animals weren't an option.

Ray had an obsession with firewood. Stacks and stacks of it covered our barn walls. Once in a while, in the deep winter, he sold it to the town's people, but not often. In between the wood

sat baskets of apples and pears from the orchard, and in the very back was Raymond's workshop.

When we first arrived in Idaho, he had worked for Mr. Sherman's logging outfit. It was strange luck that brought us to Herald Sherman, a man of vast heart and few questions. Our shack belongs to him. When he found out that Raymond had a seven-year-old sister and that we were both living in a truck, he brought us to our little home. The rent was supposed to come out of Raymond's wages, but there wasn't any change in his paycheck.

It had holes in the roof, and our first winter was hard with no insulation and only the fireplace for heat. Raymond spent the first few weeks frantically reinforcing the shutters and screwing new bolts into the doors. I was too young then to understand why.

After that he started using extra money to buy carpenter's tools: planes, routers, sanders, a lathe and a good table saw. For some reason, people in small towns feel that

homemade anything is better than what you buy in the stores and within a year, he quit his logging job and went to work as a full time carpenter.

He enrolled me in school, and we lost ourselves in the small, rustic town of Deary, Idaho. Raymond kept a newspaper clipping of my father's death. The coroner's report stated that he had been killed by an animal. We were simply declared missing, and I think the police spent some time looking for us in Dakota.

Ray hadn't killed anyone since then. We lived five miles from town and the few missing farm animals were chalked up to wolves. I guess that was half right.

The older Raymond grew, the more reclusive he became. Other kids weren't allowed at our house.

When I was ten, he let me go to a birthday party—against his better judgment—for a girl in my class named Natalie. Two sisters and a laughing set of parents carried in her flaming pink cake while everyone else sang. My shock at their

matching furniture and nuclear relationship had been profound.

***We lived five miles from town and the few missing farm animals were chalked up to wolves. I guess that was half right....***

"How come Natalie has a mother and father and two

sisters and we only have each other?" I asked Raymond on the way home.

He never answered me. But his jaw twitched and he never let me go to another party.

As time passed, one of our hobbies became book collecting. Jack London filled the backs of my eyelids with dreams, and Raymond escaped into Dick Francis novels. Sharing our adventures became important, so we took turns reading our books aloud by the fire.

One night when I was about fifteen, I finished chapter six of *White Fang*, and his brows knitted. "Why do you keep reading me stories about wolves?"

His question threw me. "I don't know..."

You read me books about race tracks."

"That's different."

"I'm sorry. I'll get a different one."

"No. It's all right. I just wondered why."

My gaze turned to the fire. "The men are all so close to their dogs. Why can't we get a dog?"

"Because I'd kill it."

"You don't know that. You could lock it in the house with me."

"Yeah, and what if it starting barking on a full moon night? What if I tore the house apart trying to get in?"

I sighed. "What about a kitten?"

He stared at the flames in silence.

"Raymond, everyone else has pets. One little kitten isn't going to change anything. Cats are quiet."

Two weeks later he drove up with a baby lamb in the back of our truck.

"We'll try something in the barn first. Get me some boards and my hammer. I'm going to have to reinforce the doors."

The curly, white animal in the truck bed bleated, and I ran to hold it instead of getting the boards. Her soft fur curled around my fingers like angel hair at Christmas. I wanted to throw my arms around Ray and thank him but knew better.

We dubbed the lamb Topsy because she fell down a lot. Even Raymond began to like her little presence while she roamed about the dusty yard in an effort to follow him.

We only had her a month.

About one in the morning on the next full moon, I heard snarling while he tore the barn apart and covered my ears when she began to bleat.

The next morning I found him sobbing and vomiting on the barn floor. We never found her body, but one chord of wood was covered in an ugly red smatter.

Ray almost never got angry, but he turned his head toward me and yelled. "Did you hear it?"

"No," I lied. "It must have been quick. So quick she couldn't have known what happened."

He buried his face in his arms and wept. I blamed myself for having pushed him and never asked for another pet.

I wish it had ended with her death. He stopped talking and sat by the fire in silence. I'd seen him like that before—depression hit him from time to time. Usually he snapped out of it on his own, but this dark mood

went on until I walked in one afternoon and found him staring down the barrel of his .357 magnum. I didn't know if normal bullets would kill him or not, but blowing his own head off seemed like it would do the job to me.

"Well's going dry," I said, ignoring the gun. "You oughta haul some spring water up in the truck."

He looked up in a daze, put the gun down, and left. I went to make dinner when the truck started—my chest constricted in panic. Talking wouldn't do any good. Raymond and I never talked about any of it. Our conversations were limited to reality at hand.

I dug under the sink for some potatoes and looked around my cramped kitchen. A fleeting thought struck me. When he came back, I wandered outside to help him unload the buckets. "How come I'm living with a carpenter and still don't have a decent pantry?"

"Huh?"

"I'm shoving potatoes under the sink. My dish shelves are full of cans, and there's no place to keep the flour. Why can't we build a pantry on to the kitchen?"

His face clouded for a moment, and he put the last bucket down. "Well, I might add something behind the back door." That was the first time he'd spoken in days. "I'll take a look at it."

The idea caught his interest. He brought home some lumber, and I held measuring tapes and boards for him. By the end of the week he was whistling again, and the gun was back in his bedroom drawer.

Our new addition was actually quite beautiful compared to the rest of the shack. "Maybe we should paint the house so it all matches," he suggested.

I'd given a smile for an answer, and we'd left for town to buy paint.

Our barn was filled with memories for me, but on the day that I had planned to make applesauce it seemed to speak even more than usual about the tales of our past. I filled a bucket with green apples and wandered back to the house. Raymond slept quietly on the couch for most of the morning, crying out only once in a while with bad dreams.

\*\*\*\*\*

ON THE MORNING of the next full moon we got up early to run a few errands. Raymond had agreed to make new cabinets for a local shop keeper named Charlie Bedford, and we drove into Deary because Charlie'd ordered some special light-toned oak for the job.

As we entered the shop, I spotted Joshua and Rueben Trotter. Both were dime store hoods and high school drop outs to boot. I couldn't stand either of them.

"Mornin' Charlie," Raymond smiled.

"Come by to pick up the oak."

"Sorry, Ray. It ain't come in yet, but it's due this afternoon. Maybe I could run it out to your place tonight."

I glanced up in alarm. Today would turn into wolf-night.

Raymond just shook his head. "Tonight's bad for me. I'm going out of town for a few days. I'll just pick it up when I get back."

Charlie nodded. "Sure, but I got your down payment here. Better take it before I forget and spend it on something else."

"Thanks," Raymond stuffed the bills into pocket without counting them. "I'll probably see you on Wednesday."

Josh Trotter was watching the whole exchange with poorly hidden interest on his greased-stained face. I wanted to leave.

"Bye, Lisa," he smiled sarcastically. "Nice talking to you."

Raymond glared at him, and he shut up.

The September sun shone brightly in the rear view mirror all the way home Ray was in a good mood for a wolf-night and chatted to me about the brass handles he planned to fit for Charlie's cabinets. Almost everyone gave him at least a partial payment in advance because he took his time on tiny details, and his work was so extraordinary.

He spent the day chopping firewood for winter, and I weeded our garden. By dusk he'd checked the doors and window shutters six times.

"After I leave you be sure and..."

"Lock the doors," I finished for him. "I know."

"Just do it."

Perspiration was beginning to run down

his hair, and I could tell he was getting dizzy.

"You better go."

"Yeah...see you in the morning."

He slipped away, and I felt that familiar empty pang of longing shoot through my stomach. Now I only suffered from loneliness though, as a child these nights had been a confused, living hell.

I walked to the window and watched him disappear, hoping he wouldn't lose his clothes this time. Once I'd suggested that he just get undressed and leave them here, but that idea didn't go over too well.

After cutting up an apple, I made some coffee and went to my rocking chair. No memories came to mind, so I finished eating and picked up a James Michener novel.

The night wore on and the fire burned low. I was dozing in my chair when the soft click of an engine shutting off startled my eyelids open. No other sound followed, but I moved to the window and peered out.

At first the yard looked empty. Then two forms passed close by, and I heard voices. "I told you he was lying. His truck's right there."

"Well, maybe he's got a car we don't know about. You heard him tell old Charlie he wasn't gonna be home tonight. Why would he lie about that?"

"Cause he don't like nobody out here. Look he how treats Lisa. He don't let nobody else near her."

"Well, the place looks dead to me. I say we start in the barn. Probably where he keeps his tools and stuff."

Josh and Rueben Trotter.

I didn't know what to do. Raymond's equipment was about to go for a long ride. Those tools represented years of hard work on his part; they were our livelihood. If I let them be stolen, he'd have to go back to logging again.

Moving quietly into his bedroom, I pulled the gun from his drawer and made sure it was loaded. The blued steel felt cold and slick in my hand. If I stayed in the house, Josh and Rueben could never get past the barricaded doors. If they tore a shutter off and broke a window, I'd have a clear shot at the first one through.

But I couldn't wait for that. They had to

be stopped before leaving the barn. What if one of them managed to take off with Raymond's tools?

I slipped out into the warm, night air—dry lawn crunching beneath my feet. The barn door stood open, and they'd been stupid enough to turn the light on.

"God, look at all this stuff. No wonder old man Charles payin' him so much."

Rueben's voice.

I moved in and pointed the gun toward his sound.

"Don't," I spat.

He whirled in panic and stared down the barrel. Too late, I realized that I hadn't paused long enough to hear where Josh was. Rueben was an insect. Josh was an animal.

"Lisa!" Rueben gasped. "I wasn't hurtin' anything. We...we... You ain't supposed to be here." He was alone.

"Where's Josh?"

"Right here," a voice whispered in my ear while his hand closed around my throat from behind.

I tried jerked the gun up, but he grabbed my wrist. His arms were all over me and the wooden floor rushed up. Before I could even think he had the barrel in my face.

"Stop it," his oily breath hissed. "Where's your brother?"

"In the house with a shotgun." I spit back.

"Yeah, sure. And he sent you out to shoot us? I don't think so."

"Why don't you go in and look?"

I was scared. They were going to take everything we had and Raymond wasn't here to stop them. I tried not to think about what Josh was going to do to me.

"Leave her alone," Rueben cried. "He might still be here."

"Shut up!"

Josh pulled me up to my feet.

"We'll just go see who's in the house," he whispered. "You stay in front of me."

The dust kicked up as he dragged me out into the front yard. I knew I didn't have much time. He was a low-life, but he wasn't stupid. It'd take him about three seconds to figure out that Ray wasn't in the house.

The front door kept growing closer. My mind was casting about in desperate directions—like elbowing him in the chest and

taking a bullet—when a soft growling sound echoed from the shadows beside the cabin.

A dark form flashed out, impacting with my shoulder. I remember the dirt in my hands and Joshua's scream.

The porch light gleamed in my eyes as I turned to the struggle beside me. A huge, furred form had Josh pinned to the ground. Its heated panting and his gasps pounded in my ears. I watched the horrified realization dawn on Joshua's face as it slowly and purposefully put its fanged mouth around his throat and ripped out his jugular, as if it wanted him to know he was going to die. I scrambled away from them.

Joshua's gasping stopped, his head lay at an unnatural angle, a dark stain was spreading into the dirt around him. His killer was now staring at me.

I knew who it was and didn't move. For some reason I'd expected him to be different from an actual wolf...that he'd be walking upright—half man, half animal. But it wasn't like that. He looked like an enormous wolf, soft muzzle dripping liquid, amber eyes gone mad.

He turned to worry Josh's dead body for a few minutes—ignoring me—and then loped toward the barn.

"Rueben, run!" I managed to shout, but it was too late.

I covered my ears to screen the sound...a sound I'd heard before and huddled on the ground.

Sometime later, a loud sniffing made me look up. Raymond was moving freely about the yard. In a macabre sense, he was beautiful. No mutation or disfigurement, just a thick gray coat and massive chest.

His diamond-shaped eyes rested on me, then looked toward the house. I wanted to cry in despair. The front door was open. Crossing the dark space quickly, he trotted inside and let me staring at Joshua's dead face.

I suppose I should have wondered why he hadn't killed me, but the thought of what would happen the next morning filled my head. Poor Raymond. I'd have to hide his gun. They weren't worth it, either one of them.

The moon was still bright, and I had a

few hours till dawn. We always kept a spare key to the truck in one of the barn's cabinets. I went to get it and to drag out Rueben.

His body lay in plain view next to the table saw, but I had to look awhile before finding his head near a pear basket. Its soft flesh had been gnawed down to the base of his skull. Only a little congealing blood remained since the open wound of his throat cavity had been licked clean.

I carried or dragged the separate pieces of him out to our truck—grunting and straining—until he was loaded, then did the same for Josh. My last requirement was a sharp edged shovel. The forests were vast and deep. No one would ever find out what happened in our front yard on that full moon in August. The only ones who could remember were dead.

\*\*\*\*\*

A FEW HOURS later I came back numb. Our yard was dark and silent with only a few patches of tell-tale blood left for me to clean up. Using buckets of water to dilute the red, I decided to leave the barn alone and let Raymond think he'd run some wild animal down and cornered it in there. That had happened once or twice before.

My true dilemma came when I'd finished getting rid of the mess. Funny how I never let myself think of them as people.

The front door stood half jarred open and the wolf was probably still prowling around the house. Sleeping in

the barn should have been the only option for a sane person.

Not even letting myself think, I walked up to the cabin and looked in. What I saw didn't surprise me.

His great body lay resting quietly by the fire. His head lifted when I reached the doorway and growled softly.

"Shhh, Raymond. It's just me," I said tiredly.

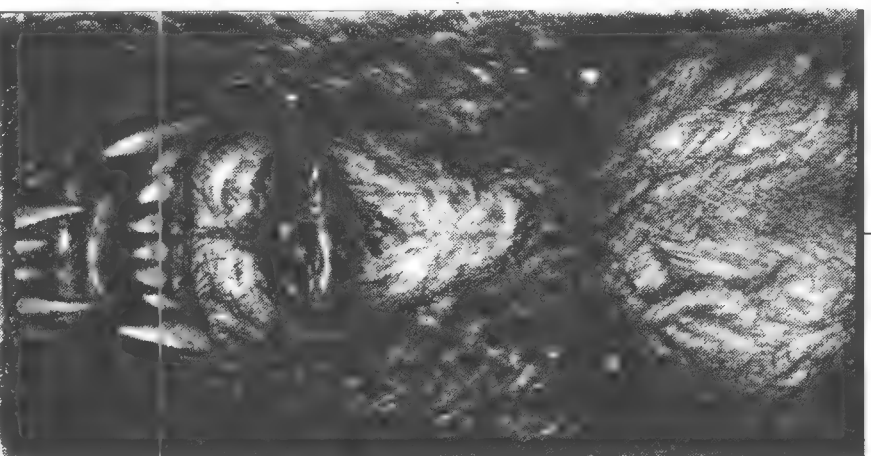
He stared for a moment and then turned back to the fire. Orange lights flickered off plywood walls. Faint crackling of low burned embers made the only sound in the world.

I stepped in without taking my eyes off him. Right then I didn't care if he killed me. For ten years I'd been living with a mystery that had retarded my life. For all of his fears about keeping locked doors between us, I don't think I'd ever

believed he'd hurt me. Somewhere buried in the wolf, Raymond still lived and breathed.

Sitting down on the couch, I pulled off my boots and then went to wash my hands, ignoring him on purpose. I behaved as though he belonged there. When I came back into the living room, he raised his head again and whined. I went to him and sat down on the floor. His low growl kept me still for a moment, studying him. The large head rested on wide paws. Besides his massive size that seemed to be his only unusual aspect.

Reaching out slowly, I laid my hand on his back and scratched gent-



Art by Bucky Montgomery



ly. He turned and looked directly into my eyes. Not human and not animal, he was somehow more than both.

I stretched out on the floor beside him and ran my hand up to his velvet head. His muscles relaxed, and he rolled over to push his back into my chest and stomach.

This was all he wanted...all he'd ever wanted, to come inside and lie by the fire. No blood or cold, dark forests, just warmth and shelter like all of us. After all these years, he'd come home.

I got up once to lock the door and get a blanket, than curled up next to him and tried to sleep. No more lonely wolf-nights. His place in the month would be lying next to me, and all the affection that couldn't be lavished on Raymond, were his. Because he'd take them.

My future had been set for a long time. No marriage or children were ahead for Raymond or me. We had no one but each other and both denied the empty starvation turning us to husks. But that was over now. Now someone was mine.

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THE NEXT MORNING I woke quickly when his convulsions started. His transformation should be private. I had no right to stay and watch. Hiding in my bedroom, I listened to the fuzzy, muted groans until I heard a human voice coughing.

"Lisa!"

He was kneeling on the floor by the low fire—horror and panic contorting his face. I ran to him.

"It's all right. I'm here."

His eyes cast about wildly as if lost. "Why am I in the house?" He stumbled up, his naked body seemed thin and pale in the cold morning light, and I noticed he wasn't vomiting. "Lisa! What am I doing in the house?"

I pulled the blanket up around his shoulders.

"You should come lie down."

"How did I get inside the house?"

I dropped my gaze and whispered calmly. "I let you in...last night."

"Why would you...? How could you...?" His voice was hysterical. "Oh, God, don't you understand. You saw what I did to Dad

and you still don't understand. I don't know anything that happens when I'm...I can't remember anything I've done."

"You didn't love Dad."

"That's a stupid thing to say right now."

"No. I mean you'd never do anything to me. You just laid by the fire all night. You aren't as sick as usual, are you?"

"What?" he snapped.

"You aren't sick because you didn't eat anything wolves eat." I tried not to think about the skin on Rueben's head. "You just laid in here by the fire. And I'll just let you in again next month if you leave the house."

"No!" His expression contorted to rage. "How do you think I'd feel if I woke up and found you in four pieces? Huh? Good morning Raymond."

"You let me sleep on the floor next to you." I crouched down, pushing my face into my knees. "Think about me. You just black out and wake up sick. I'm the one who sits up alone, wondering...picturing you dead in a ditch somewhere." All the anger from the past ten years came bubbling up and poured out. "You never talk to me! You've never let me have friends or go out to dances or movies like everyone else..."

I trailed off in tears. He fell into a stunned silence. "Lisa." He stopped, looking down at his pale body. "Stay there." He went into his room and came back wearing a pair of Levi's.

Running a hand through his thick hair, he sighed, "I don't know what to say. You know I can't change anything."

How could I explain what I'd felt in the wolf? That touching the warm fur of his chest and draping my arm across his body met everything I'd felt starved from?

Lost for expression, I simply said, "I need you to be in the house."

He dropped down beside me.

"What if I hurt you?"

I shook my head slowly. "You won't. I know."

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THE YEARS PASSED, as years do. Days seem to slide one into the other until you wake up and find thin streaks of silver in your hair and your hands have grown brown and wrinkled. I sit in my rocker now

on wolf-nights because the floor has grown too hard for my tender, old bones.

Our house is peaceful, and I feel we've lived a good life. Across the room, by the fire, lies the massive wolf with his head on his paws. His chest is spattered with white and he has long since grown too old to hunt. It's strange, but an odd contentment filled

Raymond after the wolf began to spend his hours inside with me. A calm that reflected in them both.

No one ever found out about Josh and Rueben Trotter. They sleep in wet ground somewhere down the road. They are a tribute...a sacrifice to the warmth and the fire of our hearth.

## TERROR

A paradoxical entity:  
The more we ponder,  
Often, the less we understand.  
And the less our comprehension,  
The more exquisite our torment.

—J. C. Hendee

## BEDTIME IN A DARK ROOM

I perceive  
many things which  
no one does.  
Since no one  
else  
sees them  
in any form,  
then they do not exist.  
...so I am told.

—J. C. Hendee



## Jerry Eubank

as her brains oozed like warm Jell-O and Old Faithful geysered from the red gash in her throat. Just like that one back in Utah, the one that picked him up when he was hitch-hiking with a cast on his "broken arm." "Thanks so much," he'd said. "You're an angel indeed."

The hairline crack widened a bit more. Red gash...he liked that. Nice ring to it...a nice kind of poetic justice.

Those cotton balls were itching like crazy, made him feel like he was carrying a 20 lb. load around inside him, like he hadn't taken a dump in a week.

The Night Before, they'd shaved his head—that was indignity enough.

But the Morning Of, when they'd opened his cell door, all they said was "Drop your pants. Bend over." Just like that: rude, humiliating, unfeeling...And then they'd

**...They'd strapped his chin tightly to the headboard so his head couldn't buck around when the white-hot river of a trillion trillion free electrons began to flow, firing microscopic bullets through the nuclei of a trillion trillion cells...**

shoved him full up, dry, not even lubricated, sealed him shut like a God-damned taxpayer-mist's stuffed animal, like one of Norman Bates' wall pets...as if he'd crap

all over himself when the juice hit, just let go, and then they'd have to smell it when they unstrapped him, lifted his limp body on the gurney.

Those non-entities in uniforms! He'd been in all the newspapers, made the nightly news, for six years crawled into 240 million American's living rooms! He was famous, a celebrity! Forty seven women in twelve states! Who could top that! Why that pusillanimous wimp Jack the Ripper had only done in five in his whole life, and he'd been immortalized and eulogized down through the ages! At his peak, he'd taken five in one month.

At least the papers had got it half right: they'd called him cunning, articulate, diplomatically clever. They'd admired the way he'd conducted much of his own defense at the trial, even called him brilliant, a warped genius, a shrewd, manipulative psychopath.

Like he said: they got it half right. He could feel his heartbeat rising steadily

## Dead Man's Thoughts

By Jerry Eubank

And then: Boy, is he in for a surprise. Something in the dead man's face changed. Imperceptively, the lips crinkled at the corners: the barest fluttering whisper of a smile, ephemeral as a feather's silent, slow descent in a moonless forest.

A host of precious memories suddenly flooded his brain. It had been fun, hadn't it? A hell of a lot more fun than the endless, boring classes at the law school. A hell of a lot more fun than playing Mr. Straight-and-Narrow, Mr. Junior Republican. A hell of a lot more fun than dating those vacuous sorority bitches, listening to their endless twaddle, dropping money on them like they thought you were a bottomless pit of greenbacks, and then, if you were lucky, if you were really deserving, a real gentleman, a handshake or a peck on the cheek you'd get in reward for your night of endless tedium, a "Thank you, I had a great time," when what you really wanted to do was grab them by their skinny, prissy necks, rip off their I'm-better-than-the-rest-of-the-world Bonwit Teller blouses, and then let them know you are there. Let them look deep into something they, in their smug, Daddy-gives-me-everything little worlds, can never imagine. Let them look deep into

He could hear the mortician rattling around in the other room—opening metal drawers, mixing chemicals, gathering his tools and equipment: all the accoutrements of Death's housekeeper, cleaning up His mess. Any moment now, he thought, he's going to come in here, he's going to stick his fat, greasy face between me and the burning fluorescent, and he's going to look down at me and, smiling, say, "Welcome to Hell, Ted."

And then he is going to rip open my pants, pausing for a moment to gauge and, perhaps, admire the size of my penis, the one that had jammed itself into so many quaking, unwillful cunts, and then he is going to slide that large gauge needle, what? eight maybe ten inches long, into the delicate, exposed artery in the junction between my thigh and groin, and then he's going to turn on the machine that will pump out all my blood, replace it with formaldehyde.

## Dead Man's Thoughts

now, forty beats a minute, instead of one every two and half and barely a blip at that. He was proud of himself. After all, Yogi Master Darni had called him one of the best pupils who had ever studied with him.

Funny how stupid reporters can be. Over the radio in the hearse, they'd said he'd been too frightened to walk to the execution chamber, that there was this strange, catatonic glaze of fear in his eyes, and the prison guards had to carry him.

Good thing the doctor only takes your heartbeat after the electrocution, not before. Now he actually did smile, even allowed a light chuckle. It was safe: Mr. Song of the South was still clattering around in the next room.

When they'd strapped him in, after they'd bound his wrists, his ankles, put the big belt around his chest and strapped his chin tightly to the headboard so his head couldn't buck around when the white-hot river of a trillion trillion free electrons began to flow, firing microscopic bullets through the nuclei of a trillion trillion cells; after they'd smeared on conductive jelly, after they'd attached the electrode and copper cable to his right ankle, after they'd taped his eyelids shut so his eyeballs wouldn't bulge out of their sockets, after they'd placed the leather hood over his face and fitted the metal skull cap against the crown of his head, after the ritual of lawful extinction was completed, he had sat there.

He had sat there and listened to Eternity singing. He could describe its song. It sounded like bottomless, dark, barren places; vast and empty and silent spaces; and cringing, broken, bleeding faces.

Eternity was a distant melody, an ancient lyric sung to an enchanted lute, a thought frozen in a glass paper weight, fluttering, fluttering each time the miniature universe was upended by some giant hand.

Under the hood, he had smiled. He could still see the faces of the witnesses on the other side of the broad observation glass—two rows of them.

He wished he could have given them a show—a real show. When the juice hit, he could have taken *forever* to die. He could have shaken in the chair like a Grand Mal seizure, shaken until blood oozed around

the straps and the chair threatened to rip right from the huge heavy bolts in the floor. He could have shaken and jittered and convulsed forever, as if 30,000 volts, not 3,000, wouldn't have been enough to kill him.

He would have shaken and tossed and bucked in supreme agony, until all those stern, just faces turned white as freshly washed and chilled brains and puked their guts out all over each other. They thought they were all so fucking righteous, God-in-Heaven though—they wouldn't feel so tough with their stomachs flapping in the backs of their mouths like accordians and their last meal doing somersaults off the wall.

But he has resisted the impulse, played it straight—musn't over act: they'd get suspicious. So all he'd done was snapped rigid, clenched his hands into claws around the ends of the arm rests until he felt the burning stop.

Then he'd just slumped, gone slack as a bag of fresh shit.

He'd read about other electrocutions and that was how it looked.

Uh, oh! Footsteps. Coming his way. He sat up, quickly, swung his legs over the side of the mortician's stainless steel draining table. He ripped the masking tape from his face, opened his eyes, saw daylight for the first time in two hours.

By now, all the T-shirts would be sold, all the placards reading: "Roast In Peace," and "Buckle Up, Ted—It's the Law," would be trashed, the rednecks gone home to their trailer parks and fat wives.

By now the Eye Alive vans with the roof antennas would have driven away. He was yesterday's news, history.

By now, everyone would have him dead and buried, already forgotten.

By now, all their little sorority bird brains would be breathing a collective sigh of relief, already planning their next date, their sate and secure weekend.

By now...

The steps were drawing closer. Time to haul ass.

Quiet as cat paws he slipped from the table, began to tread on silent, crepe soles toward the red-lighted EXIT sign. He

touched the door handle, pushed. It wasn't locked, of course. Funny how often doors *aren't* locked.

Outside, a blaze of light struck him in the face, a blaze almost as bright as the purest of all lights that had flowed for three minutes across his brain just two short hours ago.

He began to hum the tune of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," laughing.

He treaded across the asphalt of the historical mortuary parking lot, noting a short-skirted Candy Striper climbing into her Honda Civic. Unconcerned, she didn't even give a second glance to this walking dead man.

*So many women, so little time.*

Damn, the sun sure felt good on his face! But the night would feel better. The night was his element, his milieu, the river of darkness he swam in so freely.

He broke into a trot, swinging his arms jubilantly, exulting as a spring colt. *Damn!* There weren't words for it. It just

## Jerry Eubank

felt so fucking great! He'd fooled them all, out-smarted them all. They'd scratch their heads and wonder—and wonder, forever: How did the body disappear? It couldn't have just gotten up and walked off by itself, they'd say. The dead don't crawl off by themselves.

They'd probably pin it on that dumb, fat slob of a mortician—he was undoubtedly some sort of ghoulish souvenir hunter, probably sold the body to Michael Jackson, or something.

And they'd never, never figure it out, not even all the doctors, all the forensic pathologists, all the scientific brain trusts. They'd never even figure it out, not in a thousand years.

But he had. After all, you can develop an immunity to measles, to snake venom, to arsenic.... You just start with small doses, then gradually increase them.

But they'd never figure it out... Because no one had ever thought to try it.





## Curnow's Crossing

By Brad J. Boucher

Sometimes they bring me to this special room that's supposed to convey comfort and warmth, but deep down inside i still know where i am, and the room turns out to be just as cold and impersonal as the rest of the hospital. The room is nice, don't get me wrong. It's just that when i go inside, i can see that they tried too hard to make it homey and it misses the mark and becomes artificial.

It's shaped like the letter 'L' with the long end filled up with a hardwood table with red leather armchairs around it, like the conference room of some giant corporation. The short side of the room has a couch on one side and two easy chairs on the other, with a glass topped coffee table that's kind of sandwiched in between.

As i watch, the floor nurse is putting a plastic pitcher of water down on the conference table along with a few paper cups. She looks up and sees me watching her and smiles at me. But just before she slips her smile mask on, i get a little glimpse of the thing that really lives inside her, wanting to get out. But then her mask is on tight and she turns around and goes away.

"You can sit down now, Mr. Curnow." i look for the face that goes with the voice and match it up with Dr. Edmund Guy who's seated at the head of the table, pushing his glasses up, and giving me the once over.

"How are you feeling today?" he asks. "Are you rested?" i start pouring a cup of water as i answer so i won't have to look at him. "i didn't sleep too well last night, Dr. Guy, i had the dream again."

Dr. Sean Perry, seated to my left, clears his throat and grabs everyone's attention, i won't look at him either, especially him, i stare into my water. Swirl it around.

Dr. Perry wets his lips and continues. "The dream about your brother?" "Yes."

There's a silence in the room for a minute and i can tell that the doctors are glancing at each other and wondering what to do next. Then i feel their eyes fall on me once again and before i can help it, i look up and take a peek at each of them.

Dr. Guy is staring at me over the top of his glasses, but he doesn't bother me too much anymore, so my glance can linger more on him. He's almost completely bald, except for a tiny island of hair that's struggling to hold onto the top of his head. Dr. Perry is a different story. He's the one i don't like to look at, the one that scares me. On my first day here, i saw his darkness and it sickened me.

Dr. Perry is a walking corpse. His skin is torn and rotted, with a gaping hole in his left cheek that shows through to his teeth and gums. There's a large section of his scalp that's pulled back and hanging loose and i can see his skull glistening in the overhead lights.

Worst of all, though, are his eyes. Where his eyes should be, there are two wide camera lenses that jut out from his decayed face like a pair of binoculars. When he turns his head to look at someone, the lenses move and i can hear the electric whir as they automatically refocus.

He's looking at me now and he reaches up one of his skeleton hands to scratch at his forehead. Tiny pieces of flesh flake away from the pressure as i tear my eyes away from him.

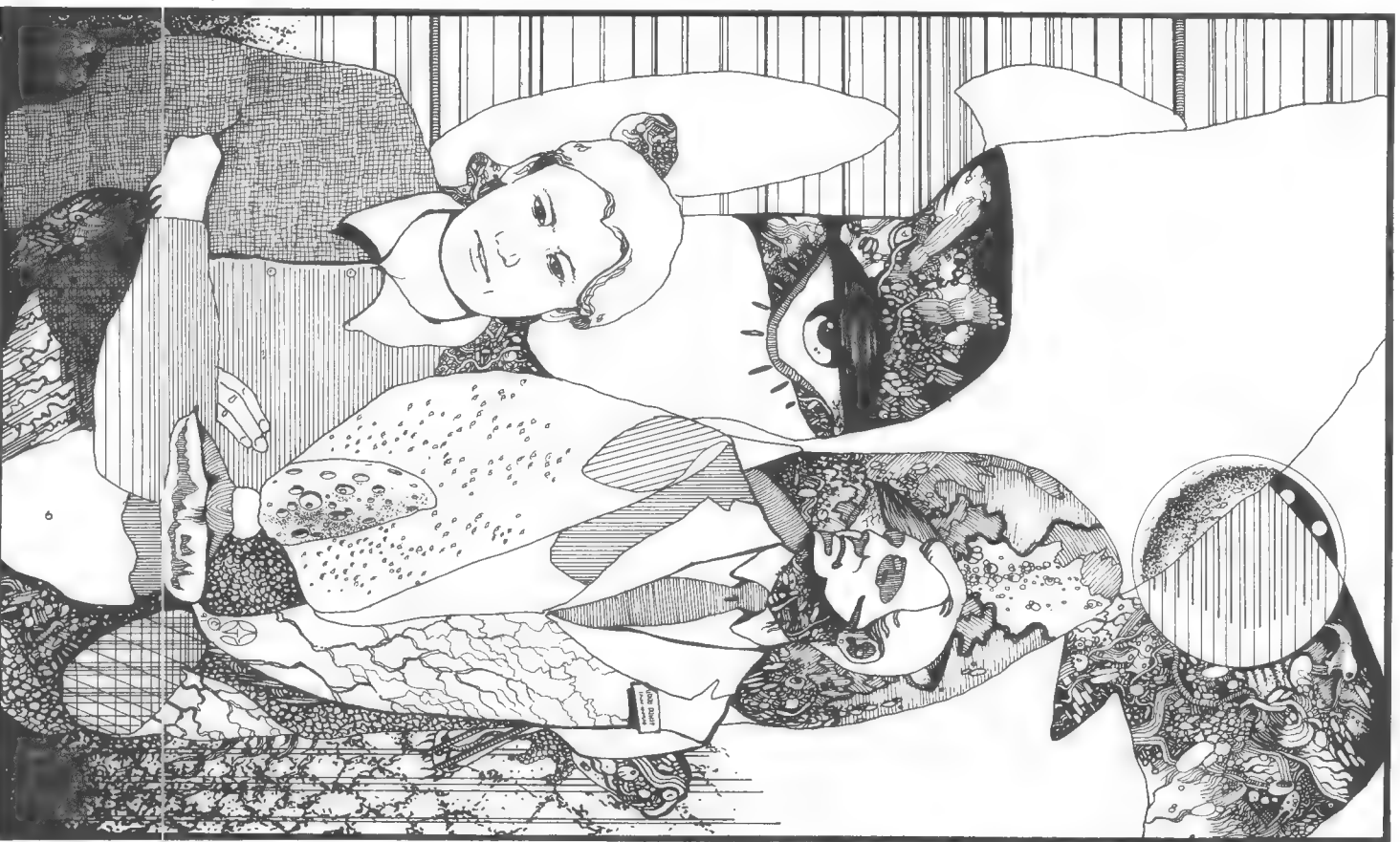
"Mr. Curnow," he croaks, "you've been here at the institute for over two years now and you've been making progress recently. Except, that is, where your dream is concerned. We would like to help you."

i glance at Dr. Guy for help but he's looking down at my hands. Following his glaze, i see that i'm rubbing my scars, which is what i do when i'm nervous.

i jerk my hands out of sight and hide them in my lap and tell the doctors that i don't want to talk to them anymore today.

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WHEN MY BROTHER killed himself, i didn't fully understand what he had been trying so hard to explain to me. It didn't become completely clear until the first time



## Curnow's Crossing

he came back to talk to me. And finally i began to understand. And shortly after that, i was able to see what he had seen.

He came back three weeks after the funeral, stepping inside one of my dreams. "Allen," he said, "remember what I told you about the corners of your eyes?"

i remembered. All those times when i would see something out of the corner of my eye, only to turn and see that there was nothing there. i just always assumed that it was my eyes playing tricks on me. Until Johnny explained.

"What you think you see, those quick glimpses you get until you turn to look at them, they're really there. It's no trick. We're just not meant to see them. They're always there, always around us, but they're on the other side of the line. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

i didn't.

"Look, it's simple. When you catch a glimpse of something, you aren't imagining it. It's real. The only reason you see it at all is because it let its guard down for a split second and exposed itself to you."

i asked why it would do that if it didn't want to be seen in the first place.

"It does that, Allen, to get a quick glimpse at you."

And he pointed a finger at me and chuckled. "There's a very fine line between what we think we see and what is really out there. Some people can cross over that line. I did. And you can."

After that he stepped out of my dream and i woke up crying.

Johnny came to my dreams, again and again, each time telling me the same thing, until one night when i couldn't sleep. On that night, he came to me in person.

He just stepped into my room, out of the darkness, and said, "You're very close to it now, Allen. Too close to turn away. Accept it. Take it in."

That was the only time that Johnny came to see me outside of my dreams.

That was the night i tried to kill myself.

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SOMEONE IS SCREAMING down the hall from my little room and by the voice i guess it must be Mr. Keese, two doors along. He screams pretty often, but it's not his fault. i know why he screams, even though the doctors still haven't figured it out.

i know because i've seen him and i've also seen the creature with the scaly body and the yellow eyes that's always around him, trying to get into his body.

i feel sorry for him but there's nothing i can do, nobody in here will listen to me. It's not easy for me, being able to see what i see, the nightmares, the things behind the people masks.

Sometimes i wish Johnny hadn't made me see the other side, that i could just be

**...i've him, and i've also seen the creature with the scaly body and the yellow eyes that's always around him, trying to get into his body....**

like everyone else. But then i see people like Dr. Perry and i can see how they really are. He's not here to help me, he's just here to study me, to put me into a little file with a million questions marks on the front. If i didn't have my vision i would trust him, and then i would become lost in the shuffle of papers that he keeps on his clipboard.

The lock clicks in my door and i turn to stare out my tiny window. i'm not in the mood to see anybody right now.

"Are you feeling better today, Mr. Curnow?"

It's Dr. Guy, the one man in this place that i believe in. It's safe to look at him, so i turn around and give him a smile. "Good morning, Dr. Guy."

He keeps his mask on tighter than most people, but i don't think he has much to hide, and that only makes it easier. i've seen what he's like inside and that's why i trust him. Inside of him, there's white stuffing and soft white clouds that drift about but never collide. He's honest when he says he wants to help me.

"I came today because i'm under the impression that you're uncomfortable talking to Dr. Perry. I thought you might be

more open if we were alone."

He's right and he knows it, waiting quietly for me to agree and begin to talk. And before i can reach the switch that will stop me, my mouth opens and i start to let loose about my dream.

When i'm finished, i look up to check Dr. Guy's reaction.

He's looking back at me with warm understanding stamped onto his face, like he knows exactly what to do, what to say to make my whole life right again. Just before i'm sucked in and ready to believe in him, something moves behind him. Shifting my focus, i can see that it's a snake, a big one, green and gold with black marble eyes. It's crawling up over his shoulder and down his arm.

i'd hate to think that he's fooling me, leading me on, because that would leave me without help.

"And that's it. That's the dream," he says, more of a statement than a question.

i nod.

Dr. Guy leans back and rubs his chin, deep in thought, a man trying to unscramble the mixed pieces of different jigsaw puzzles. He drops his hand back to his lap and grins. Not his usual grin but a frightening one that i've never seen before. It makes me a bit suspicious and i start to wonder how thick Dr. Guy's skin really is, how much there is that i might have missed.

My sight is beginning to get out of hand again, and the feeling that i'm completely alone is overwhelming. Dr. Guy was my last hope.

But i suppose it doesn't matter anymore. i have a plan.

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It's a sturdy, hard section of pipe that's about a foot long, with one end bent into a ninety degree angle. i unscrewed it from underneath the bathroom sink, where there are no cameras to spy on me, and then,

## Brad J. Boucher

walking past my empty mirror, i smuggled it back to my bed in the baggy green pants they make me wear. i hid it under my mattress and that's where it is now, only about six inches from my fingertips as i sit on the edge of the bed and stare back at Dr. Perry.

He came to visit me about an hour ago, his dead man's hands clutching at his clipboard and his camera eyes drilling into my mask.

He started out immediately by asking me what i thought my dream meant, what it represented, and i haven't answered him yet.

But he's very patient and turns the silence into his weapon, to stare at me and beat me down until i break and have to say something. Today is different, though, and he knows it. Instead of looking at the floor like i usually do, avoiding his gaze, today i'm staring right at him, so close that i can almost smell the odor of death that lingers about him.



Twice he flipped open my file and made a few scratches inside, and both times i saw tiny question marks fall out of the file and onto the cold tile floor. The nurses aide will probably sweep them under the rug along with the rest of the pieces of our lives.

"Apparently, Mr. Curnow, you don't feel like speaking right now," he says in his raspy voice, and this time i know that i've beaten him with his own silence.

He gets up in defeat and prepares to leave. i stop him cold.

"Do you know what i'd like to talk about today, Dr. Perry?" i ask quietly.

He turns and reaches for the pen in the breast pocket of his hospital coat. "What, Mr. Curnow?"

"i'd like to talk about that little girl you met on vacation last summer at York Beach. The very young one that your wife and friends must never, ever find out about."

He knows that there's no possible way

on earth that i could know about this, but i know, it's a darkness that i saw in him on his first day back from his leave. The image had stood out so powerfully that it had demanded attention. And my vision doesn't lie.

His jaw drops open and i get a quick glimpse of the disease and muck that lives inside of him. He tries vainly to regain his composure but his hands are shaking and his voice is quavering.

"What? What are you talking about, Curnow?" No mister, just Curnow.

"You know exactly what i mean, Dr. Perry. And you know how i know about it."

It's working. This is the curve-ball that i needed to put him off guard, to turn the tables and leave me in control.

His camera eyes are stuck on my face and now he's really losing his upper hand because i'm smiling at him and Dr. Perry has never, ever seen me smile.

"You don't know anything, Curnow. Nothing."

He turns away and he's walking towards the buzzer panel beside the door. He's going to ring down for some male nurse to come and sedate me.

When he gets a few steps away, i pull out the lead pipe and advance behind him. i'm just about to smash the pipe down on that decayed head of his when his fingers reach the button and he rings the emergency signal.

Dr. Perry turns and i bring the pipe down with both hands onto the side of his head, putting all my weight behind the blow.

He goes down to his knees, the pipe still stuck in his skull, black liquid oozing down his cheek and onto his white coat. Black bugs start to climb out of the hole and he tries to stuff them back in with one of his dead hands.

His camera lenses are staring up at me, zooming into my mind, tearing at my thoughts, and i know that i'm not finished the job yet. i can't have those eyes studying me anymore.

i hear footsteps running in the hall. i have to be quick with this awful business. i wrench the pipe loose and Dr. Perry

screams i pain. It's the first *real* sound i've ever heard from him. Holding the pipe in my hand like a hammer, i swing it in a tight arc and shatter one of his camera eyes.

The other eye is trying to adjust its focus but i smash it before it can find me. When i pull out the pipe, a trail of red and green wires is hooked around the end, so i just let it fall to the floor.

A key hits the lock outside my door and i back away towards the bed.

They're fumbling with the lock now and i have to think fast. i have to remember what Johnny showed me, but it's getting hard to think.

i remember the thin line and the scars on my wrists and the cheap masks that i've been hiding behind, but i'm still missing the key. i had to kill Dr. Perry, the very reality of the act enough to prove my existence. But that wasn't the answer. Proving my *non*-existence would be the final reality.

The door bursts open now and Dr. Guy and two male nurses come into the room. They look upon Dr. Perry's body in shock and disgust. Dr. Guy's fear betrays his mask and i can see that, although he really did want to help me, he never truly believed in me. That's why i was always alone in this place.

i'm in the corner by my bed, where they won't see me right away. And that's when the answer comes. i think of what Johnny told me about the line. Accept it. Take it in.

I reach up just as they start to look for me and i tear away my mask, setting loose the real me, the person that i've always been but never got to know.

Looking one last time at Dr. Guy, I can see that his mask is gone. I can see by the expression of terror and confusion on his face, that i've finally crossed over.

## Crazy Man Spoke

inside are only empty little white rooms shrouded bleak but clear and quiet and two windows alabaster at best a white door handle with a little white keyhole that doesn't ever turn I wish pale wishes of palor with bleached expression wailing a white and violent wail where is color

—C. Darren Butler

## They Talk of Hell

february sweat, the wrong kind, fills my lungs the passengers standing talk of hell, i'm afraid to check for maggots crawling under my hat

—Wayne Allen Sallee

## Looking Glass

One eye left looking, One eye stuck to the glass. No blinking to betray the fact that it has dried and stuck permanently, unless otherwise noted. That is all i have to say.

—Michael White

## In The Emergency Room

Sterility has its own stink, sour, salty, metallic as your fear of the word "lump."

A Flat-lined monitor eyes an old woman propped in a steel chair, praying to god and herself while her husband welcomes plastic snakes into his veins and gurgles incantations.

Square steel galleries above people by boxes marked chronic gut, sterile gauze tongue blades.

Death wears a clean white coat and sympathetic smile, a stethoscope wrapped round his throat like an amulet or an asp.

—Michael White

## Day Dream

In the day I dream— A sun sets slowly sinking into the clouds, bleeding crimson upon them. Naked crying children run indoors. Inside their mothers sit, glistening sweet sweat upon their heaving breasts. They stare into silver mirrors, mesmerized by their beauty, touching their tender skin. I awaken, ravenous with a thirst. Crawling up I shall reach the moonlight and feed on those that dream in the night.

—Chad Hensley



# Forbidden Texts

## Book Reviews

**CARRION COMFORT** by Dan Simmons  
1990 Warner Books  
\$5.95/\$8.94 Pages

HAVING MADE HIS mark in science fiction with the award winning novel *SONG OF KALI*, Dan Simmons enters the horror market in a big way with *CARRION COMFORT*: big not only in scope or size but also in talent. We can rejoice at the arrival of the mass market edition of this Bram Stoker award winner.

The epic opens at a Nazi extermination camp of WWII with a small taste of the horrors to come. After the vivid prologue, the scene shifts to Charleston, SC, 1980. Three old friends are having their annual reunion at which they discuss the previous year's events and how many people they have killed. In a morbid variation of show and tell game, they discuss each death and give each other points for originality. These people are mind controllers, able to enter normal people's minds at will and force them to do whatever they bid. It usually ends in death for the controlled and a nourishing "feeding" for the vampire-like controller.

For years this trio has been playing their "game," blissfully unaware of any others who may have the same power. But now, others are aware of them. After two of the group are apparently killed and the third is forced into hiding, the full scope of the novel begins to develop.

Simmons has carefully paced his exposition to allow the scope to widen with every new character he introduces. He brings a fullness to the breadth of his characters. This helps the reader to find believability in the fantastic nature of the plot. A good example of this is Tony Harrod, though only a pawn in the grand scheme of things, he uses his power only on women so that no woman can refuse him his desires. The manner in which Simmons presents this leaves no doubt it is one of the most disgusting forms of assault imaginable.

My favorite of the many characters in the novel was Melanie. Her better days, during turn-of-the-century Austria, are well behind her; though she continually reflects on her past. Simmons tells her tale by giving the reader a look through her own perspective showing her child-like nature and innocence. Then he pulls his "camera" back allowing the reader to witness the wizened old crone slaughtering dozens of innocents in a brutal, cast-offish manner. His ability to combine these elements into a believable and almost sympathetic character demonstrates the type of talent he possesses.

The "normal" characters populating this opus include: Saul Laski, who first discovered the power existed during his stay in a death camp of WWII and who would spend several decades tracking down his former controller; Natalie Preston, a young black woman whose father's senseless murder drives her to seek revenge against an unknown enemy; Bobby Joe Gentry, an intelligent and honest sheriff who is upset over the bloodbath that has occurred in his fair city of Charleston. Eventually he falls for Natalie and does whatever he can after the three "normals," as unlikely a trio as ever existed, unite against the monsters.

Further into the novel we are introduced to another group of mind controllers. The group of five, going by the name of The Island Club, would occupy the other side of the board as the giant chess game begins to make itself obvious.

The final half deals with confrontations, retreats and the gradual elimination of players from the game. When the "kings" come face to face for endgame, and after a somewhat superfluous trip into "The Most Dangerous Game" territory, the stakes are made clear and the stage is set for the wild, explosive climax: the type of ending that would cost Hollywood millions to duplicate.

On the downside, I found the epic to be two-to-three hundred pages too long. Perhaps some might argue for the length to better define the nature of the many characters. I felt it only allowed more time to shoot holes in their believability. Tony Harrod's evil nature, perfectly illustrated through his deeds during his first two appearances, never really develops. Despite having a "meaningful" relationship with a woman,

his narcissism never changes. He remains a minor-level, shit-head whose presence in the novel is over-used. Natalie Preston, only recently grief-stricken over her father's murder, comes across more dedicated and with a stronger drive than career controller-hunter Saul Laski. Laski, the old man, who at times is "so tired," is quite capable of incredible feats of stamina and endurance, seemingly through willpower alone.

Ultimately, it is Simmons' writing that carries the reader through the valleys of exposition to the peaks of breathless action. His is a talent that is headed in many directions. Whether he chooses to write science fiction or horror he is bound to succeed. For further examples of his horror talent, check out the three excellent short stories he has in the recent collection *THE SKIN TRADE* (a.k.a. *NIGHT VISIONS* 5).

I certainly recommend this one to all horror fans and to anyone who can "go with it" and enjoy an epic novel of grandiose scope and imagination.

—Randy Johnston

**THE BRAINS OF RATS**  
by Michael Blumlein  
1990 Scream/Press  
\$25.00/197 Pages

WHEN FANS AND pros are asked to name their favorite authors, the ones that send them searching for each new release or inspires them to buy a magazine or anthology just to read a single story, the responses given usually form quite a varying list of names. There is the fan favorite: those who write in a straight-forward, exciting style which is easily digested. And there is the pro favorite: the kind of writer whose style is off-center, whose message is not easily discerned and whose narrative is, more often than not, open-ended and vague. Many casual fans will find the latter's style irritating as it may require too much thought. They might cast it aside with a comment like "it didn't do anything for me." Writers and editors will take more interest, not only because of the story's ability to contrast itself from other currently available material, but also because they are more aware of the tricks of the trade and will

## Book Reviews

appreciate how the writer has used them. Having established this debatable school of thought, I believe Michael Blumlein falls into the camp of being a writer's writer.

Blumlein's new book, his first short story collection, is a mixed bag of science-fiction, horror, fantasy, and mainstream. Upon initial viewing, most of the tales appear light in narrative and shallow in characterization. However, if one reads a little more perceptively they will find stories rich in mood, atmosphere and underlying messages thereby giving the reader reason to pause for contemplation. Blumlein establishes a simple backdrop on which he skillfully paints the moral dilemmas in which his characters are trapped. He does not provide easy resolutions for the characters and their problems because, as in real life, there are no simple answers to their dilemmas. Blumlein seems to be challenging each reader to question his own thoughts on how he feels about the given situation.

The lead story, *The Brains of Rats*, a 1988 World Fantasy Award nominee, is an obvious example of Blumlein using moral dilemmas as the core of his narrative. The protagonist, a physician, has the means to make every newborn the same sex; all male or all female. His dilemma—which sex is better—leads to a series of ruminations on sexual roles. It is this, the pondering nature of the tale, exemplified through a series of vignettes, that demonstrates everyone's need "to possess, and be possessed" and it makes for the meat of the story. It is not a tale of horror or science fiction and is really not a tale at all. It is more like a discussion the writer has allowed us to sit in on.

Of the twelve stories included, three are first presentations. *Keeping House* delves into a woman's deepening psychosis as she attempts to maintain order in her new home while, despite her best efforts, is exuding vile odors. It works best once the reader realizes the house represents the woman's life and her crumbling grasp of reality. *The Gitter* and *the Glamour* takes us through the reconstruction of an android as he prepares to become, for the nth time, a famous actor with an equally robotic actress as his wife. The loss of identity after so many

(Continued on page 52)

parts have been played is the crux of the dilemma. *The Wet Suit* offers a peek into sexual fetishism by way of a son attempting to come to grips with his recently deceased father's fixation with rubber goods. Blumlein's skill at avoiding excessive exploitation of the trappings of the tale and his focus on its underlying moral dilemma of how one forgives, forgets and finds out how to continue to love makes the story the winner that it is.

Blumlein's previously published stories run the gamut of the genres but mostly fall into the category of disturbing mainstream fiction. He has a professional background as a physician and he manages to use his medical knowledge in formulating the settings in several tales. To his credit, he does it without boring us with jargon we may not easily grasp. The exception is *Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration: A Case Report*. It is a medical journal entry on the living dissection of a former president with whom we are all familiar. There is a dry punch line at the end and it is the only story with an EC-style ending. More typical of Blumlein are *The Domino Master* and *The Thing Itself*. The former deals with a child's need to find escape from the cruelties present in his life. The Domino Master is a modern day Pied Piper, leading his willing subject into a better place of existence. As the story says, "Everyone has his own dominance," and once recognized, the child in us all can find that happy place. The latter story is an unabashed story of love and all it entails. A nurses' affection for the imperfection in others—"A secret, barely conscious deal: her men will have flaws"—comes into play when she falls for a man with cystic fibrosis. As his condition worsens and death becomes eminent, the couple's way of dealing with it, both individually and unitedly, carries us through to the uncompromising and yet uplifting conclusion.

As the boundaries of horror continue to expand, it would seem a greater range of material is being so labeled. Whereas Blumlein writes of disturbed realities and moral dilemmas using the short story as a platform to encourage readers to explore their own feelings, I would not label

Blumlein's material as horror at all. It works as mainstream material which would be suitable in **PLAYBOY**, **THE NEW YORKER** or even **ESQUIRE**. However, I am sure we will see more of his work in horror magazines and anthologies. He provides, in his tales, an atmosphere quite different than the Lovecraftian variations of vengeful dark gods or the gory shock stories most prevalent these days, and it helps to provide the quality mix most editors are seeking.

As I stated in my opening paragraph, Blumlein is a writer's writer. He does not deal in shocks or visceral thrills and may disappoint many who wander across his work in search of what is commonly recognized as horror. Give him your undivided attention, like a student to a professor, and you may find yourself questioning things you might not have thought about for a while.

—Randy Johnston

## YEARS BEST HORROR STORIES XVIII

Edited by Karl Edward Wagner

1990 DAW Horror/367 Pages  
\$4.95

**THE GOOD ANTHOLOGY**, like the successful concept album, Paul Simon's *The Rhythm Of The Saints* being a recent example, presents a variety of compelling material. Not only should a collection of work by different writers entertain; ideally it ought to provide a degree of enlightenment; both in terms of stories presented and in manner in which they are introduced.

The editor who consistently excels is Karl Edward Wagner with his annual **YEARS BEST HORROR**. The latest edition lives up to its predecessors, featuring enough chills and sick-witted gross-outs to get any scare-freak through the winter. As always, Dr. Wagner's intros, both to the anthology as a whole ("Horror from Angst to Zombies") and to the individual writers and their material, is expertly rendered. His drolly humorous commentaries are crawling with tidbits of interest.

A wide range of American and British work, including short stories and poetry, is presented. Among the better stories in the book (*my* favorites, at least; to each his

own, I say) are *The Pit-Yarker* by Brian Lumley, a realistic look at an incident that occurred years earlier in the narrator's youth. It owes more to Hitchcock than to Lovecraft, as does *The Confessional* by Patrick MacLeod, a story of compulsive murder with a twist.

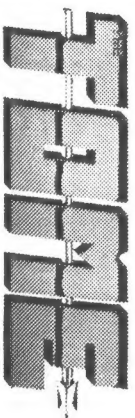
*Reflections* by Jeffrey Goddin (first published in **DEATHREALM** #10) is a soul-chilling look at alienation in the modern urban maze. Ian McDowell's effectively terrifying *On The Dark Road* takes us out in the sticks to run from shadows and sprawl over mangled corpses in the night. It has what I call a bloodcurdling-shrek finale.

I absolutely loved *Nights In The City* by Jessica Amanda Salmonson. Most entertaining, this tale of a nebish ghost who fixates on an independent young woman in Seattle. Salmonson manages to be eerie, amusing and interesting, all while creating characters who are entirely sympathetic. It is the sort of story, like Nina Kiriki Hoffman's *Zombies For Jesus*, also featured in the collection, that makes a reader want to rush out looking for more by that author.

The top poetry, by far, is the piece by Bruce Boston and Robert Frazier entitled *Return To The Mutant Rain Forest*. Read it carefully, savoring imagery. It had me checking myself for toxic growths. Ecologically sinister.

I cannot fault any of Wagner's choices, although some naturally fail to click with me as keenly as others. In addition to the above-mentioned standouts, I found numerous others worthwhile for some reason or another. Wagner exhibits an enviable balance of taste and style; there is something here for everyone, from the patient, introspective work of the mostly literary British writers, to the hyper-terrors of the more cinematically-inclined Americans. **THE YEARS BEST HORROR STORIES XVIII** hit the stands ("tracks," I think, being somewhat more appropriate to discussions of this nature) way back in the goblin month of October. When this review comes out, it will be too late for me to suggest it as a stocking-stuffer, but you should keep it in mind as a possible birthday gift for fellow-travelers throughout the year.

—Mike Newland



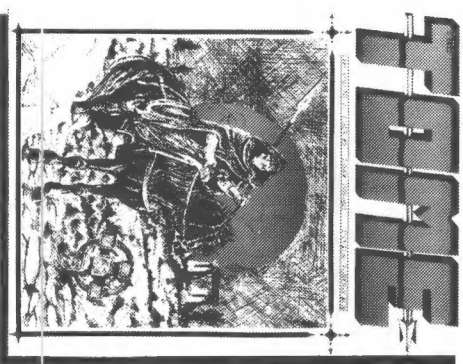
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Issue #5 features:  
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Fred Chappell  
Greensboro, NC

DEATHREALM #13 IS maybe your best that I've seen. A whole lot of Hitler going on, but also a lot of good stuff. Bill Trotter wonderful, but the stories by Niall and Smith very nice and ugh-ly.  
Keep on spookin'!

H. E. Fassel  
Chicago, IL

DEATHREALM #13...AN EXCELLENT issue, sir, one you can well be proud of. Every story was read and enjoyed, and I'd be hard pressed to say which was my favorite. *Symptom* gave me quite a start as I well remember running through those clouds of pesticide during my own boyhood. Borkowski's back cover is an excellent piece of work. Excellent use of his medium (watercolor? ink wash?) and a fine simple composition.

Your editorial was quite disturbing. I've been following the censorship madness in the art press but your tale of Shannon Riley's experience is indeed horrifying. What the hell is wrong with these people? Always hunting in the wrong places for a scapegoat to blame for this sorry mess we've made of the world. I expect we'll all find ourselves in the dock eventually, awaiting trial for consorting with ye Devil or find our houses surrounded by a torchlit mob of neighbors armed with rakes, hoes and weed whackers.

Mike Newland  
Garland, TX

GOT ISSUE #13 in mein kuppe. I found the interview with James Robert Smith fun, primarily for the interesting personal experiences he relates. I envy him his dad's livelihood of the 60s. I can't imagine having a father who bought comics! Smith's stark parable *Parched* has stood out in my mind ever since you first ran it (DEATHREALM #8). Of the fiction and poetry I've read thus

far, I liked the period-piece setting, the execution and the idea of Ronald Kelly's *Oh, Sordid Shame!*, while the march-of-bad-time imagery in Chad Hensley's *Festival of Stigmata Martyrs* was most effective. Has Hensley ever thought of collecting his poems and dedicating them to the Vatican?

As usual, even though I only occasionally have the opportunity to check out the material she reviews, Andrea Locke's writing about small press horror/fantasy magazines is informed, fresh and easy to get into. She seems to have her own personal standard of excellence, which I believe distinguishes reliable criticism from reactionary fan-babble. I mean, who can you trust if not the dispassionate critic in an overhyped world prone to nepotism, where everybuddy simply adores everybuddy else's latest effort?

George Hatch  
Long Island City, NY

I'VE SO FAR read three stories in the latest DEATHREALM. William R. Trotter's *A Pinch of Snuff* had an absolutely terrific premise based on some of those bizarre rumors we hope are not true. The story was beautifully written and developed until the ending which seemed too abrupt and terribly contrived. Jim Shelley's *We Are Seven* was also well-done until its predictable ending. And Ron Kelly's *Oh, Sordid Shame!* was another of his terrific southern gothic pieces packed with atmosphere and dark secrets. Speaking of Ron, he always sends you great stories and I do believe just about every issue of DEATHREALM has a complimentary letter from him regarding your previous issue. So: did you really have to run such a rotten review of his latest book? What a terrible thing to do! And downright mean-spirited to boot. As Stanley Wiater pointed out at NECON re: his review column in FANGORIA, he doesn't print had reviews of books by new authors. I'm not saying you were supposed to publish a good review, but it might have been more gentlemanly to simply ignore the book altogether. Oh, sordid shame on you, Mark Rainey! (I hope it doesn't tarnish any "gentlemanly"

reputation I might have established, but I'm more inclined to agree with Mr. Newland's comments pertaining to reviews in the letter above yours. I didn't think the review was mean-spirited; his jabs were not at Ron, but at the book itself—Ye Ed.)

Norman Partridge  
Lafayette, CA

HAVEN'T HAD A chance to write you concerning the last several DEATHREALMs. I guess Halloween's as good a time as any.

I enjoyed several stories in the last four issues. I'd say the best were Frastley's *Where Evil Waits*, Kyle-Keith's *Tincture*, McKenzie's *Little Lucas*, Shelley's *We Are Seven*, and Smith's *Symptom*.

I had high expectations for Price's *The Deprogrammer* and Trotter's *A Pinch of Snuff*, but both stories ultimately fell short for me. Interesting ideas, though. I guess I've been most disappointed in the Lovcraftian stuff of late. I think interesting stories can be written using Lovcraft's themes or style; for me the trick is that the author must bring something of his own to the tale (as in the Chappell tales you've used), or else we're stuck in the land of "homage."

But just when I think you might be getting a little stale, you surprise me with a great story like *Tincture*, which I never would have imagined as a DEATHREALM story. That's what keeps me interested.

Chad Hensley  
Los Angeles, CA

THANKS FOR ISSUE #13. Each tale was splendidly gruesome. *Oh, Sordid Shame* was a horrific tale of the old south. Much enjoyed the werewolf-like beastie rage that overtook the family members. For some reason, *From My Reflection*, *Darkey* really disturbed me and now I may never look quite the same way at mirrors. *We Are Seven* has to be my favorite. The plotting was superb and kept me turning the pages furiously. The ending completely took me by surprise and I had to go back to see if I somehow had missed something (which apparently I did). *Bloodbone* was quite the

grotesque little tidbit. I was very appalled by the last line and it made me physically shudder. As always, the artwork was superb. Fassel's photos get increasingly more shocking. As far as the poetry goes, *Mind Hatching* was my favorite. I was a bit disappointed with Grey's *The Use of Mountains*. Not quite as gripping as his usual work. Nevertheless, a very enjoyable issue.

Brad Boucher  
Salem, NH

AS I EXPECTED anyway, DEATHREALM #13 kicked my ass! Oh yeah, it did, and what an enjoyable experience it was!

Right from the start, with Harry Fassel's DARKMAN-inspired cover, I knew I'd be in for a wild ride, but I never thought it would be like this. Good Lord, I'm not sure where to start.

Okay, fiction. William R. Trotter's *A Pinch of Snuff* is one of the most harrowing psychological tales I've read in years (and I mean years), and the fact that the main character is a televangelist is a magnificent touch. Four stars to Mr. Trotter.

Jim Shelley's *We Are Seven* also impressed me as a wonderfully chilling piece, and I loved the way he presented Angstrom's twisted tale. He might be what he says, but then again...hmm. All of the other fiction impressed me as well, but I found the two I mentioned to be the leaders of the pack.

As for poetry, Carl Buchanan's *The Urging* and Chad Hensley's *Festival of Stigmata Martyrs* both stand out as highlights, while the always dependable Cathy Buburuz delivered a very thought-provoking piece that still has me wondering.

One item that bothers me, though, is the James Robert Smith interview. While I truly enjoy his fiction (including *Symptom*, which I loved), I seemed to find a contradiction in his opinions of new writers. At one point, he praises Jeff Osier and Wayne Allen Sallee as two of the most original writers out there today, and he's absolutely correct on both counts. But then he complains that Clive Barker is receiving undeserved attention. I don't understand. If (continued on page 56)



## OUT FROM THE SHADOWS, cont.

there's someone with more original concepts than Clive Barker, I'd like to see him. (That could make for a debate in itself. I agree with Bob whole-heartedly, by the way. As for Barker's fiction: I don't think one can argue that it isn't original, the quality of execution of these ideas is a whole different matter—Ye Ed!).

But hell, a minor complaint, and one I'm sure I'll quickly get over. I just want to congratulate you on another fine issue of **DEATHREALM**. I think it's the best issue yet!

Bruce W. Timm  
Northridge, CA

JUST FINISHED **DEATHREALM** #13 and had to tell you how much I enjoyed it. Oh, *Sordid Shame* started off with a potentially intriguing viewpoint, but kind of ran out of steam. A *Pinch of Snuff*, likewise, started out very promisingly, with some genuinely creepy imagery, but was ruined by the predictable denouement. *From My Reflection*, *Darkly* was a fairly satisfactory Lovecraftian piece, but was a bit too short to properly build up the mood and suspense. We *Ave Seven* did nothing for me, I'm afraid. As for D. F. Lewis' *Bloodbone*... Jeez, I read the thing twice and I still can't figure it out!

The other two short-stories were the finest stories of the bunch, both excellent examples of the form. James Robert Smith's *Symptom* was quite inventive and drily humorous. *Broken Things* by Nina Kiriki Hoffman was sad, touching and rather sick all at the same time. Amazing!

While not quite as strong as previous issues, the artwork in #13 was of very high quality, as usual. **DEATHREALM** is easily the most consistently attractive horror/dark fantasy magazine around. I'm not much of a fan of the J. K. Potter/Harry O. Morris school of photo/art, but the cover by Fassi was outstanding.

The other departments were enjoyable as usual. One minor quibble: see if you can print an entire letters page without a letter from one of your regular contributors! Seems kind of clique-ish. ((*Clique-ish?* The letters that appear in the column are virtually

all that I receive by the deadline for publication—which is usually about it. Period. I'd love to include more names in the column, but I can't print what I haven't got. Would any of you readers like to help remedy the situation?—Ye Ed.))

## DEATH'S DOOR (Continued from pg. 29)

prised when their efforts failed to deliver anything approaching true quality. (I must ask Mark for a raise.)

However, all was not lost and I did not completely waste my time reading this issue for review.

Earlier this year, Jessica Amanda Salmonson knocked me on my rear with her story in **YEARS BEST HORROR** (*Nights in the City*), and I was most pleased with her story here, *Parakeet*. It is, perhaps, one of the most darkly funny things I have ever read. This story had me, literally, giggling aloud. It's a simple tale, and I have to give anything away, so I can only advise you to buy **ET #23** and read this story. I'd love to see it make **YEAR'S BEST**.

A lesser tale, but nonetheless enjoyable, was *The Benevolence of Aunt Charlotte*, by Donald Burleson. It concerns the recounting of a young orphan's tenure in the care of his wealthy and seemingly doting aunt, who had adopted him. I generally hate stories set up for a punchline, but this one was so skillfully executed that I liked it. I almost always enjoy Mr. Burleson's stories which seem to only appear in **ELDRITCH TALES**. Does he publish anywhere else? If not, he should. He's quite good.

The other good work of fiction was handed in by British author D. F. Lewis, whose story *Bloodbone* appeared in the last issue of **DEATHREALM**. This story, *The Silver Tea Leaf*, is very short, but delivered with all the power of an expensive perfume. And it opens with one of the best first lines I've ever read. Mr. Lewis has a true command of the language.

For plain old production values, **ELDRITCH TALES** is hard to beat, and this issue is no exception. But as for the general level of writing, this #23 was a grave disappointment and were it not for the trio of glowing exceptions, would have been a truly awful presentation of fiction.

Here's hoping for a better try on #24. ☺

# DEATHREALM

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